



Adult Speech and Language Therapy

# Speech and swallowing in Parkinson's disease

If you have Parkinson's disease you may develop problems with your speech and communication, with your swallowing or with your saliva control. Speech and swallowing difficulties do not always accompany each other and some people with Parkinson's experience little or no change in these areas.

### Speech and communication

You may have difficulty with:

- a soft voice or lack of volume. Often people with Parkinson's disease do not realise that they are speaking quietly as their volume sounds normal to them.
- your voice starting strong, but fading whilst speaking
- a hoarse or tremulous voice
- monotonous sounding voice/speech
- mumbled speech
- speaking too quickly
- hesitancy or difficulty getting speech started
- forgetting the words for what you want to say
- reduced facial expression.

These difficulties can lead to problems making yourself understood in one-to-one conversations, in groups or on the telephone. Taking your turn to speak or interrupting conversations may also be problematic.

A speech and language therapist can give advice to help you to manage your communication difficulties. In some cases, a programme of therapy or a referral for an assessment for a voice amplifier or communication aid may be beneficial.

## Tips to make your speech clearer

- Make it as easy as possible for other people to hear you. **Get rid of background noise.**
- Look at the person you are speaking to. Make sure they are **looking at you as you speak.**
- Make an effort to **speak loudly and clearly**, but do not strain your voice. If you feel you are talking at the top of your voice you are probably speaking at the right volume!
- **Speak slowly.** Emphasise the sounds you say within words.
- **Introduce topics** before talking about them.
- **Short sentences** are usually clearer than long ones. If you have to say a lot, try to break it up into short chunks, taking a breath in between.
- **Emphasizing key words** in a sentence or reducing your message to key words only can make it clearer. For example, saying "Tea please" instead of "I'd like a cup of tea, please."
- **Don't try to talk and do something else** at the same time.

## How other people can help

- Be patient and tolerant as speech may be slow and take great effort. Give plenty of time.
- Use questions that require a short answer rather than a lengthy explanation.
- Avoid finishing the speaker's sentences (unless they ask you to) - you may guess incorrectly.
- Remember, listening requires more attention than usual.
- Never pretend that you have understood if you have not. Repeat the part of the message you understand and ask questions to establish what else was said.
- Use questions to establish the topic. For example: "Is it to do with.....?"

## Saliva control

Many people with Parkinson's disease develop difficulty controlling their saliva and this can lead to dribbling or drooling.

The natural tendency to swallow saliva may reduce, you may become more stooped, with your head down, and there may be difficulty sealing your lips, leading to saliva escaping from your mouth.

Sucking a sweet, chewing gum or taking frequent sips of water can encourage more frequent swallowing of saliva. Sweets and gum should be sugar free to avoid tooth decay.

There are free apps available to remind you to swallow.

Changing your posture or humming to keep lips closed when leaning forward can be helpful.

Your GP or specialist may also be able to prescribe drugs to control saliva production.

### Swallowing difficulties

Difficulty swallowing may lead to weight loss or, in severe cases, repeated chest infections.

You may experience:

- drooling on food or drinks
- difficulty moving food in your mouth or chewing it
- difficulty triggering a swallow
- coughing or choking on food, drinks or medication
- a wet or gurgly voice during eating or drinking
- food moving more slowly through your oesophagus (food tube to the stomach) or feeling it gets stuck in your throat or chest
- increased meal times due to slow eating

## General advice for swallowing difficulties

- **Sit upright**, or as near to upright as you are able, in a secure, supported position, ideally in a chair. Remain upright for 20 minutes after a meal.
- **Keep your chin slightly lowered.** Do not tilt your head back or up.
- **Allow time** for each swallow to occur. Make sure that you clear any food or drink left behind in the throat or mouth before having any more. You may need to swallow twice for each mouthful.
- Having **frequent sips of a drink** during your meals may be helpful. Very cold fluids (from the fridge) can help to stimulate a swallow.
- **Reduce distractions** whilst eating. Avoid talking with food or drink in your mouth.
- **Avoid straws** or beaker lids unless advised to use them by your speech and language therapist. This will give more control of how much fluid is taken per mouthful.

## What you eat and drink

The texture of food can make a difference to the safety and ease of swallowing. These textures include pureed, minced and moist, and soft and bite sized foods.

Some food may need to be completely avoided or need extra care. These may include mixed consistencies, such as cornflakes with milk, fruit and vegetables with skins, hard food, chewy food or very dry, crumbly textures, for example biscuits.

In some cases, thicker drinks may be easier to swallow than thin drinks as they move more slowly in the mouth and throat. This gives more time to swallow them safely and easily.

A speech and language therapist can advise on the best consistency of food for swallowing and if thicker fluids are likely to be helpful.

### Further information and referral

Speech and language therapists can give advice about managing both speech and swallowing difficulties. To access the Oxford Health Speech and Language Therapy Service:

- Speak to your Parkinson's Nurse, GP or any other health professional involved in your care about making a referral for you.
- Telephone Adult Speech and Language Therapy on 01865 904193
- Visit [www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk](http://www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk) and search "Adult Community Speech and Language Therapy". Click "Access our services" to find the referral form and email the completed referral form to [AdultSLT@oxfordhealth.nhs.uk](mailto:AdultSLT@oxfordhealth.nhs.uk)

You can find out more information about speech and swallowing difficulties at [www.parkinsons.org.uk](http://www.parkinsons.org.uk) or by telephoning the Parkinson's UK helpline on 0808 800 0303.

## Concerns and complaints

We aim to provide you with a high quality service at all times. However, if you have any concerns, complaints or comments about your experience of our service then please tell a member of the team or contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service on freephone 0800 328 7971.

If you need the information in another language or format please ask us

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