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Parkinson's Disease Awareness

A Practical Guide for Care Staff

Knowledge Hub Resource 057

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Introduction

Parkinson’s disease is a progressive neurological condition that affects the brain and can influence movement, communication and many aspects of everyday life. Although Parkinson’s is often associated with tremor, the condition can cause a wide range of symptoms, and every individual experiences it differently.

Common difficulties may include slower movement, stiffness, balance problems, changes in speech, fatigue and difficulties with everyday activities. Some individuals may also experience problems with swallowing, sleep, mood, memory or thinking. Symptoms can fluctuate, meaning a person's abilities and support needs may vary at different times of the day.

Care staff play an important role in supporting individuals living with Parkinson’s by promoting independence, allowing sufficient time for activities, following individual care plans and recognising changes that may require further assessment or support.

Why This Resource Matters

Understanding Parkinson’s disease awareness helps care staff to:

- Recognise some of the common symptoms of Parkinson’s.
- Understand that symptoms and abilities can fluctuate throughout the day.
- Support mobility and independence safely.
- Allow individuals sufficient time to communicate and complete everyday activities.
- Understand the importance of prescribed medication being given at the correct time.
- Recognise possible swallowing or eating and drinking difficulties.
- Observe changes in an individual's condition and report concerns promptly.
- Provide compassionate, dignified and person-centred support.

Key Message

Parkinson’s affects every person differently. Care staff should focus on the individual's abilities, preferences and agreed care plan rather than making assumptions based on the diagnosis.

By allowing sufficient time, promoting independence, supporting prescribed medication routines and recognising changes promptly, care staff can help individuals living with Parkinson’s maintain dignity, confidence and the best possible quality of life.

Understanding Parkinson's Disease

Parkinson's develops when nerve cells in an area of the brain responsible for movement become damaged and levels of a chemical called **dopamine** are reduced. Dopamine helps coordinate smooth and controlled movement, so reduced levels can lead to difficulties with movement and other symptoms.

The symptoms of Parkinson's vary considerably between individuals and may change over time. Some people experience noticeable tremor, while others may have little or no tremor but experience stiffness, slower movement or difficulties with balance.

Care staff should therefore focus on the **individual person and their usual abilities**, rather than assuming everyone with Parkinson's will experience the same symptoms.

Common Symptoms and Everyday Difficulties

An individual living with Parkinson's may experience:

- **Tremor** – involuntary shaking, often affecting a hand or arm.
- **Slowness of movement** – everyday activities may take considerably longer.
- **Muscle stiffness** – movement may become uncomfortable or restricted.
- **Balance and mobility difficulties** – potentially increasing the risk of falls.
- **Freezing** – temporarily feeling unable to start or continue a movement, particularly when walking.
- **Changes in speech** – speech may become quieter, slower or more difficult to understand.
- **Swallowing difficulties** – which may affect eating, drinking and medication.
- **Fatigue and sleep problems.**
- **Changes in mood, memory or thinking.**

Not everyone will experience all of these symptoms, and their severity can fluctuate.

Supporting Someone with Parkinson's

Care staff can help by:

- Allowing sufficient time for movement, communication and everyday activities.
- Encouraging independence rather than automatically completing tasks for the individual.
- Following mobility and falls-prevention plans.
- Ensuring walking aids and other agreed equipment are available when required.

- Listening patiently if speech is slow or quiet and avoiding finishing sentences unnecessarily.
- Following prescribed eating, drinking or swallowing guidance where this is in place.
- Supporting medication routines exactly as documented and within the limits of your role.
- Observing for changes in mobility, swallowing, communication, behaviour or general wellbeing.

Remember

A person with Parkinson's may be able to perform an activity independently at one time of day but require additional support at another. This does not necessarily mean they are being uncooperative.

Patience, time and person-centred support are particularly important. Recognising fluctuations and adapting support appropriately can help preserve independence, dignity and confidence.

Professional Responsibilities

Care staff play an important role in supporting individuals living with Parkinson's to remain safe, independent and involved in their own care. Because symptoms can fluctuate, staff should understand the individual's usual abilities, recognise changes and follow their agreed care plan.

As a care professional, you should always:

- Treat every individual with dignity, patience and respect.
- Follow the individual's care plan and agreed support arrangements.
- Allow sufficient time for movement, communication and everyday activities.
- Encourage independence and avoid unnecessarily taking over tasks the individual can complete themselves.
- Follow agreed mobility and falls-prevention guidance.
- Be aware of any swallowing or eating and drinking guidance in the care plan.
- Support prescribed medication routines exactly as documented and only within the limits of your training and competence.
- Record relevant observations and changes accurately.
- Report concerns promptly and follow organisational escalation procedures.
- Never alter medication, mobility arrangements or other aspects of treatment independently.

The Importance of Medication Timing

For many people living with Parkinson's, medication is an important part of controlling symptoms. Some Parkinson's medicines need to be taken at **specific prescribed times**, and significant delays may cause symptoms to worsen or affect the individual's ability to move, communicate or carry out everyday activities.

Care staff involved in medication support should:

- Follow the individual's Medication Administration Record (MAR) and care plan.
- Give medication at the prescribed time when authorised and trained to do so.
- Never change the dose or timing without appropriate clinical instruction.
- Report missed, delayed or refused medication according to organisational procedures.
- Seek advice promptly if there are difficulties administering prescribed medication.

When to Raise Concerns

Report or escalate concerns if:

- There is a sudden or significant deterioration in mobility.
- The individual experiences repeated falls or increased difficulty with balance.
- There is new or worsening difficulty swallowing food, fluids or medication.
- The individual begins coughing or choking when eating or drinking.
- There is a significant change in speech, alertness, behaviour or cognition.
- Parkinson's medication is missed, significantly delayed, refused or cannot be administered as prescribed.
- The individual develops new symptoms or appears unusually unwell.
- You are concerned about any sudden change from the person's usual condition.

Sudden severe symptoms or a medical emergency should be managed in accordance with the individual's emergency care plan and organisational procedures, with urgent medical assistance sought where required.

Good Practice Reminder

Parkinson’s is a complex condition, and an individual's abilities can vary considerably throughout the day. **Never rush someone simply because an activity is taking longer.**

By providing time, patience and appropriate support, following medication and care plans carefully and recognising changes promptly, care staff can help individuals living with Parkinson’s maintain their independence, dignity and quality of life.

Summary

Diabetes is a long-term condition that requires individualised care and support. Understanding the basic principles of diabetes helps care staff recognise changes that may indicate low or high blood glucose and respond appropriately in accordance with the individual's care plan.

Care staff play an important role in supporting healthy daily routines, observing changes in wellbeing, maintaining accurate records and reporting concerns promptly. Staff should always work within their training and competence and should never independently alter an individual's insulin, medication or diabetes treatment.

Diabetes Awareness Checklist

✓ Follow the individual's diabetes care plan and agreed support arrangements.

✓ Be aware of the individual's usual signs of low or high blood glucose.

✓ Support appropriate nutrition and hydration according to individual needs.

✓ Support blood glucose monitoring only when trained, competent and authorised.

✓ Administer insulin or diabetes medication only when trained, competent and authorised.

✓ Never independently change medication, insulin doses or treatment.

✓ Observe for changes in eating, drinking, behaviour and general wellbeing.

✓ Record relevant observations accurately and report concerns promptly.

✓ Encourage independence and involve the individual in their care wherever possible.

Further Information

For further guidance on diabetes, visit:

NHS – Diabetes
https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/diabetes/

Diabetes UK
https://www.diabetes.org.uk

NICE – Diabetes Guidance
https://www.nice.org.uk

Care Quality Commission (CQC)
https://www.cqc.org.uk

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Related Knowledge Hub Resources

- Resource 007 – Preventing Dehydration in Care Settings
- Resource 008 – Encouraging Good Nutrition in Care Settings
- Resource 020 – Pressure Ulcer Prevention Awareness
- Resource 028 – Medication Safety Awareness
- Resource 034 – Recognising Deterioration in Care Settings
- Resource 049 – Frailty Awareness

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- Nutrition & Hydration Awareness
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