

Parkinson's is a disease of the central nervous system. It is a progressive disorder, meaning it gets worse over time. The disease affects a small area of cells in the middle of the brain. This area is called the substantia nigra. The cells slowly lose their ability to produce a chemical called dopamine.

The decrease in the amount of dopamine can result in one or more general signs of Parkinson's disease. These include shaking of the hands, arms and legs. They also include difficulty moving or keeping balanced while walking or standing. Also, there may be emotional changes, like feeling depressed or worried. The symptoms of Parkinson's differ from person to person. They also differ in their intensity.

The disease is named after James Parkinson. He was a British doctor who first described this condition in eighteen seventeen.

During the nineteen sixties, researchers discovered changes in the brains of people with the disease. These discoveries led to medicines to treat the effects of the disease. There is no cure for Parkinson's and no way to prevent it. And doctors still are not sure about the cause.

America's National Institutes of Health says at least five hundred thousand people in the United States are believed to have Parkinson's disease. About fifty thousand new cases are reported each year. That number is expected to grow as the average age of the population increases.

Parkinson's appears most often in people over the age of fifty. Some researchers believe that almost everyone would develop Parkinson's eventually if they lived long enough.

Most patients have what is called idiopathic Parkinson's disease. Idiopathic means the cause is unknown. People who develop the disease often want to link it to something they can identify. This might be a medical operation or extreme emotional tension.

Yet many doctors reject this idea of a direct link to Parkinson's. They point to people who have similar experiences and do not develop the disease.

There are several theories about the cause of Parkinson's, but none has ever been confirmed. Studies have shown a link between the disease and some chemical products. Two years ago, an American study found a link between Parkinson's and pesticides, like those used for killing insects. The study compared three hundred nineteen Parkinson's patients to more than two hundred family members.