Early symptoms of Parkinson's disease are usually mild and generally occur gradually. You may have fatigue or a general sense of uneasiness. You may feel a slight tremor or have difficulty standing. Some may notice that their speech has become softer or that their handwriting has changed. You may forget a word or thought and have feelings of depression or anxiety. Generally, friends and family may begin to notice the changes before you do. They often notice the stiffening or lack of movement, or the absence of facial expression ("masked face") seen in Parkinson's disease.

As the disease progresses, it begins to interrupt daily activities. It is important to note that not all people with Parkinson's disease experience the full range of symptoms; in fact, most people with Parkinson's have mild, non-intrusive symptoms.

Staying Independent With Parkinson's, and Other Ways Pets Improve Health

What Are Common Symptoms of Parkinson's Disease?

Muscle rigidity. Rigidity is the inability of the muscles to relax normally. Most people with the disease develop some degree of rigidity, or stiffness of limbs. This rigidity is caused by uncontrolled tensing of muscles and inhibits your ability to move about freely. Also, you may experience aches or pains from affected muscles.

Tremor. In general, tremor (shaking) begins in the hands and arms, although it can also occur in the jaw or foot. Tremor typically involves the rubbing of the thumb against the forefinger, and is more apparent when the hand is at rest, or you are under stress. In the early stages of the disease it usually only affects one side of the body or one limb. As Parkinson's progresses, tremor may affect other parts of the body. Not every person with Parkinson's disease has tremor.

Bradykinesia. Bradykinesia is the slowing down of movement and the gradual loss of spontaneous activity. It is caused by the brain's slowness in transmitting the necessary instructions to the appropriate parts of the body. This symptom is especially stressful for people with Parkinson's, given that it is unpredictable and can be quickly disabling. One moment a person is moving easily; the next, they need help moving at all. This makes accomplishing simple tasks and participating in daily routines extremely difficult. Bradykinesia affecting the facial muscles may cause the mask-like appearance seen in Parkinson's.

Changes in walking (gait). This commonly includes the inability of a person to swing their arms naturally while walking, taking short shuffling steps, "freezing spells" (difficulty starting to walk and difficulty stopping), and difficulty in maneuvering turns and corners.

Other Symptoms of Parkinson's Disease

Loss of balance

Forward or backward lean that can cause falls

Stooped posture (when the head is bowed and the shoulders are slumped)

Head shaking

Voice and speech changes (voice will become softer with poor enunciation)

Loss of motor skills

Memory problems

Changes in handwriting (smaller writing)

Constipation

Depression

Feelings of fear and anxiety

Confusion

Dementia

Fatigue

Drooling

Skin problems, such as dandruff

Difficulty swallowing and chewing

Sleep disturbances

Urinary problems

Sexual dysfunction

Lightheadedness or fainting upon standing (orthostatic hypotension)

The fact you have these symptoms doesn't necessarily mean you have Parkinson's disease. There are other conditions that appear similar to Parkinson's disease, including:

Depression

Aging

Use of anti-psychotic drugs

Other degenerative disorders of the brain

It is important for you to visit your doctor if you are experiencing any of these symptoms so you can receive the proper diagnosis and treatment. If there is any question about the possibility of Parkinson's disease, you should consider talking with a movement disorders specialist.