

Learning About Parkinson's Disease

By Anita Finley, Gerontologist

Once attended a Parkinson's support group and although it was well run and people were getting some answers to their concerns, I heard that nothing seemed to change from one meeting to another. Was that because the facilitator was not knowledgeable about the disease and was just trying to keep everyone happy? One important fact I did learn was this disease is the second most common neurodegenerative disorder after Alzheimer's disease. It is more common in the elder population and rises from 1% in those over 60 years of age to 4% of people over 80.

After listening to Dr. Andy Mencia one Saturday on his weekly radio show, "The Wonderful World of Wellness," I knew that the support group needed to have Dr. Mencia give them real answers.

Explaining a little bit about Parkinson's disease (PD), Dr. Mencia said it belongs to a group of conditions called motor system disorders, which are the result of the loss of dopamine-producing brain cells. The four primary symptoms of PD are tremor, or trembling in hands, arms, legs, jaw, and face; rigidity, or stiffness of the limbs and trunk; bradykinesia, or slowness of movement; and postural instability, or impaired balance and coordination.

Early diagnosis is based on medical history and a neurological examination. He emphasized that once there is a suspicion that a patient has PD, the quicker treatment is begun, the less brain cells will be lost. He said that once tremors begin, there may already be a loss of 70% and if gone untreated, it can quickly reach 90% of the death of dopamine-generating cells in your brain. Dr. Mencia was adamant about managing the early motor symptoms of the disease and use of levodopa and dopaminergic medications.

It is important to be alert to what psychotic drugs are being given to our elders in nursing homes and assisted living facilities to treat aggressive or other disturbing actions from their residents and which can mask serious diseases like Parkinson's.

Early symptoms of PD are subtle and occur gradually. In some people the disease progresses more quickly than in others. As these symptoms become more pronounced, patients may have difficulty walking, talking, or completing other simple tasks. As the disease progresses, the shaking, or tremor, which affects the majority

of PD patients may begin to interfere with daily activities. Other symptoms may include depression and other emotional changes; difficulty in swallowing, chewing, and speaking; urinary problems or constipation; skin problems; and sleep disruptions.

At present, there is no cure for PD, but a variety of medications provide dramatic relief from the symptoms. Scientists looking for the cause of PD continue to search for possible environmental factors, such as toxins, pesticides and herbicides that may trigger the disorder, and study genetic factors to determine how defective genes play a role. Dr. Mencia believes that it is genetic and that families need to be aware of this factor. Other scientists are working to develop new protective drugs that can delay, prevent, or reverse the disease.

Dr. Mencia said that currently, PD patients are given levodopa combined with carbidopa. Carbidopa delays the conversion of levodopa into dopamine until it reaches the brain. Nerve cells can use levodopa to make dopamine and replenish the brain's dwindling supply. Although levodopa helps at least three-quarters of parkinsonian cases, not all symptoms respond equally to the drug. Bradykinesia and rigidity respond best, while tremor may be only marginally reduced. Problems with balance and other symptoms may not be alleviated at all.

PD is both chronic, meaning it persists over a long period of time, and progressive, meaning its symptoms grow worse over time. Although some people become severely disabled, others experience only minor motor disruptions. Tremor is the major symptom for some patients, while for others tremor is only a minor complaint and other symptoms are more troublesome. No one can predict which symptoms will affect an individual patient, and the intensity of the symptoms also varies from person to person.

If you are not tuned in on Saturdays at 7AM on WSBR740AM and WWNN1470AM to hear Dr. Andy Mencia on the "Wonderful World of Wellness," you are missing out on one of the liveliest, best medical information radio shows in South Florida.

Under the medical direction of Dr. Andy Mencia, the Adult & Geriatric Medical Center is noted for its caring and responsible medical practice. It is located at 1608 E. Commercial Blvd. in Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33334. To make an appointment, call 954-489-1345.



Andy Mencia, M.D.