

# Information

## PARKINSON'S & COGNITIVE CHANGES

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Cognitive symptoms or changes are common in Parkinson's and are referred to as Parkinson's related Cognitive Changes or Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI). Not everyone experiences them but they can be part of the natural progression of the condition. In some cases cognitive changes may become severe and have a significant impact on daily living.

Cognition is the 'umbrella' term used to define thinking skills or mental abilities - these include:

- Attention and concentration
- Speed of thinking
- Memory and learning
- Visual functions
- Language skills
- Executive function – planning and organisation, problem solving, multitasking, seeing different points of view and controlling urges or impulses.

### Types of Cognitive Changes

**Difficulty paying attention and concentrating** is often the most common change in the early stage of the condition. This can make communication challenging due to word finding difficulties, following conversations or remembering names. This in turn can lead to problems with memory and recalling new information.

**Slowness of thinking** is referred to as bradyphrenia and mirrors the slowness of movement (bradykinesia) seen in

Parkinson's. This can also impact on following conversations. It is common for people with Parkinson's to experience fatigue due to having to concentrate harder when doing things quickly. Bradyphrenia may affect safety when walking in busy environments. It is also an issue when driving due to a delay in reaction time.

**Difficulty starting activities or tasks** is similar to the physical difficulty in initiating movement. This may appear as if the person has less energy or drive.

**Difficulty in multi-tasking** can lead to challenges in the work force or at home.

**What causes these cognitive changes?** These cognitive difficulties are due to the Parkinson's related neurological changes. Cognitive changes can also be affected by other health issues such as medications, infections or mental health issues such as depression or anxiety. It is vital that these symptoms are discussed with the treating medical specialist or General Practitioner.

**Please remember:** While doing some things may be difficult because of Parkinson's there will be many things which you will do well. Some people may avoid or limit activities because they are more challenging than previously but it is important to try to maintain a mentally and emotionally stimulating life style. Try to modify the tasks in order to continue doing them safely. Assistance from a psychologist or occupational therapist will help achieve your goals.

### Practical Tips to Assist with Cognitive Changes

#### Concentration and Bradyphrenia

- Do one task at a time (especially if it is important)
- Do important tasks when you are rested
- Avoid distractions in the environment (radio or television) when focusing on a task
- Allow extra time to complete tasks and to recall words or names
- Deliberately concentrate as you do the task, for example, talk to yourself "Did I pack my keys?"

For further information contact your state Parkinson's organisation:  
**Freecall 1800 644 189 [www.parkinsons.org.au](http://www.parkinsons.org.au)**

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- Plan the task ahead to avoid rushing and added pressure

## Short Term Memory Changes

- Use diaries, checklists or alarms
- Ask the person you are talking to for confirmation if you feel you have forgotten something important and write it down
- Use a 'memory corner' where important items such as keys or phone are always placed
- Try to establish a routine and write it down
- Use a Webster Pak, Tab Timer or phone alarm to remind you of medication times

## Difficulty Starting Activities

- Introduce a routine/ schedule to the day
- Set goals for the day and use checklists to stay on track
- Include enjoyable activities and focus on your areas of interest
- Consider becoming involved in group activities

## What to do if you are experiencing cognitive changes or you are aware of them in a loved one?

- It is vital that any concerns or questions are discussed with your doctor ( the treating medical specialist or the General Practitioner)
- It can be useful to have a neuropsychology assessment to measure the type and extent of the cognitive changes experienced if any- this may require a medical referral
- Use the strategies outlined in this information sheet to help address the challenging changes

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