March to Wellness

The Journal of Parkinson’s Disease recently published a meta-analysis of 106 research studies done over the past 25 years with a goal of helping researchers better understand how physical activity may benefit those with Parkinson’s. While researchers are still trying to determine what the best recommendation for exercise is, this meta-analysis showed: exercise was associated with improvements in clinical symptoms and quality of life; exercise was strongly correlated with improved gait, balance, mobility and posture; and exercise showed the greatest potential to help lower and upper limb strength and endurance.

“March” seems like a great month to work exercise into your long-term disease management plan. Given all the ongoing research in this field, why not give it a try? HAPS currently has 158 monthly classes in various disciplines to choose from and participants can attend as many groups as they want. Take a look at all HAPS has to offer—check the insert of group listings and get started today!

Land exercise benefits the physical and psychological well-being of individuals with Parkinson’s disease. Land exercise also helps keep muscles strong and can improve flexibility and mobility. It can improve balance, helping people overcome gait problems and can prevent some of the secondary complications of Parkinson’s disease, such as stiffening of the joints, muscle rigidity and constipation.

Tai chi is an ancient Chinese martial art practiced for both defense training and health benefits. It is a noncompetitive, self-paced system of gentle physical exercise and stretching, connecting mind and body. Tai chi involves performing a series of postures or movements in a slow, graceful manner. Each posture flows into the next without pause, ensuring constant motion. Research indicates that practicing tai chi appears to reduce balance impairments in patients with mild to moderate Parkinson’s disease, with additional benefits of improved functional capacity and reduced falls.

Yoga benefits include improvements in respiratory functions, posture, muscle mobility, cognitive functions, mood, balance and movement. HAPS yoga classes focus on utilizing breathing techniques along with controlled movements to help manage the symptoms of Parkinson’s.

Dance which is presented in partnership with Houston Ballet offers a fun and exciting environment for people to tap into their creativity and apply some of the groundbreaking approaches that have been shown to benefit those with Parkinson’s. Live piano music accompanies the class and incorporates various types of music, encouraging participants to dance independently and find their own beat.

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Tango has been the subject of research studies that show that of all the partner dances, it is the most beneficial for improving the balance of those who have been diagnosed with Parkinson’s. The first thing that students of Argentine Tango have noticed is enhanced awareness of body. In addition, tango students acquire a deeper understanding of movement in relationship to both the music and their partners. The focus of instruction is on “leading” and “following” which enables everyone to dance together. Social interaction among students during the learning process fosters a sense of camaraderie and accomplishment.

Speech therapy classes offer a group setting which provides a supportive environment within which to practice and apply communication skills. Speech therapy helps individuals with PD increase self-awareness about how their speech and voice sound and provides ongoing education about the effects of PD on speech and swallowing. Compensatory strategies that are taught enable the person with Parkinson’s and their care providers to maximize communication effectiveness through voice and speech techniques that improve breath support, articulation and voice quality.

Music therapy utilizes live music which is created throughout the session to facilitate the exercises by providing auditory cues that instruct the brain and body on how to move in space and time, and with how much force. Based on the Neurologic Music Therapy protocol, these key elements are guided by the fundamentals in music that include rhythm, tempo, meter, harmony, melody and dynamics.

Singing provides group members with the opportunity to use singing as a fun and practical method of expanding breathing, maintaining and increasing voice projection and working the lips, tongues, jaws and soft palates, all in the context of singing familiar Broadway songs and popular music they are inspired by!

Boxing which is HAPS’ most recent addition to its exercise program requires dynamic balance and multi-directional movements that help increase balance and improve gait. This non-contact, high intensity class incorporates diverse forms of training in a fun and supportive environment. Two weekly groups are currently offered. Those interested should contact the HAPS office for more information.

Water exercise allows freedom of movement, which promotes improved range of motion and increased functional strength. It provides buoyancy and weightlessness which creates an environment for fewer falls, less risk of injury and greater opportunity for muscles to relax, lengthen, reduce stiffness and build endurance.
Researchers have found that people with Parkinson’s disease (PD) have lower levels of a certain protein in their blood than people with similar diseases. The results suggest that testing for the protein might help doctors to accurately differentiate between PD and similar diseases early on. The study appears in the February 8 online edition of Neurology.

Because there are no definitive diagnostic tests for Parkinson’s, the diagnosis can be unclear especially early on in the disease. When diagnosis is uncertain, some people may be diagnosed with “parkinsonism,” which refers to a category of diseases, including Parkinson’s, that cause slowness of movement, stiffness and rest tremor. Other diseases in the category include multiple system atrophy (MSA), progressive supranuclear palsy (PSP) and corticobasal degeneration (CBD).

Earlier studies found that a spinal fluid test may help distinguish PD from these other diseases, but this test is difficult to do during a routine visit to the doctor.

For the new research, scientists led by Oskar Hansson, M.D., Ph.D., at Lund University in Sweden, developed a blood test for a protein called neurofilament light chain protein (NfL) — the same protein detected by earlier spinal fluid tests. Then they used it to analyze blood samples from 244 people with PD, 88 with MSA, 70 with PSP, 23 with CBD and 79 healthy individuals. Most study participants had been living with their diseases for four to six years, but a subset had been diagnosed within the previous three years. Study participants included those from hospitals in Sweden and in London, UK.

Results

• Blood levels of NfL protein were generally lower in people with PD and in healthy individuals than in people with other Parkinsonian disorders.

• This result held both for those recently diagnosed and those who had been living with their disease for four to six years.

• The test for NfL could not distinguish between MSA, PSP and CBD.

What Does It Mean?

Distinguishing between Parkinson’s and Parkinson’s Plus Syndromes can be difficult, especially in the early stages of disease. When doctors are unsure if the symptoms of rigidity, slowness of movements and tremor are classic PD or a Parkinson’s Plus syndrome, they may diagnose a person with “parkinsonism.” Over time, as symptoms progress, the diagnosis will become clearer.

The current study suggests that in cases of uncertainty, blood levels of NfL may help the doctor determine if a person is living with PD or a PD plus syndrome. It’s important to note that levels of blood NfL were similar between people with PD and controls, which means this blood test isn’t useful for diagnosing Parkinson’s disease overall, but simply for differentiating it from similar diseases.

In addition, having an accurate blood test could help to improve clinical trials. It’s thought that some promising clinical trials fail because participants are incorrectly diagnosed. A blood test would solve this issue.

Lastly, if we are able to develop drugs to slow or stop PD, a simple test to distinguish PD from parkinsonisms would help identify people who would benefit from disease-specific treatments. It’s important to note that this blood test studied was only for those living with parkinsonisms. The search is still on for a simple blood test or biomarker that can distinguish people with PD from healthy individuals.

References:


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Thank You!

Many thanks to HAPS Medical Advisory Board member Erin Furr Stimming, MD, Associate Professor, Chief of Neurology, LBJGH, Co-Director UT MOVE, UTHealth, McGovern Medical School who led the February 4th presentation of the Newly Diagnosed Education Program. We appreciate your time and expertise.
This year’s TEAM HAPS raised an impressive $117,021 through the Chevron Houston Marathon and increased Parkinson’s awareness with a massive group of nearly 200 runners and walkers participating in race weekend. We thank our dedicated head coaches, Steve Atchison and Josh Huss, who served as our 2017 co-chairs and assembled an amazing group of MVPs who came out to make this a successful and fun event. HAPS would also like to thank all of the runners, walkers, fundraisers, volunteers, spectators, and the nearly 700 donors (listed below) who participated in the Marathon and helped make this a winning season!

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5. Leon Keeler $4,525
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HAPS is currently enrolling individuals for the next Parkinson’s Enrichment Program (PEP) session of 2017 scheduled to begin this spring!

This fun enrichment program is offered quarterly to individuals with mild Parkinson’s disease who can function independently and who can commit to four hours for five consecutive Fridays. Each week is different with components of exercise; recreation; socialization; education; peer-led discussion; professionally facilitated support; and lunchtime conversations.

Registration is required and space is limited.

For more information, please contact Celeste Harris, LMSW at 713-313-1706 or harris@hapsonline.org.

Painting with Parkinson’s:
A Parkinson’s Awareness Month Event
presented by Houston Area Parkinson Society

Thursday, April 13th
1:00 pm - 3:00 pm

American Red Cross
2700 SW Freeway
Houston, TX 77098

Join us for step-by-step instruction with artist Susan Wingfield, as we create one-of-a-kind tulip paintings during this fun Parkinson’s Awareness Month event!

Come paint and celebrate with friends as we recognize the 200th anniversary of Parkinson’s disease. Submit your finished masterpiece, to be voted on by your peers, and have your image selected to be featured on this year’s HAPS t-shirt!

No previous art experience required. Supplies and refreshments will be provided. Space is limited.

Register by April 7th at 713-626-7114 or harris@hapsonline.org.

Newly Diagnosed Education Program

An educational program for those who have been diagnosed with Parkinson’s within the last three years offering an introductory look at the disease, treatment options and proactive disease management strategies.

Saturday, April 8th
8:30 am - 12:30 pm

Presented by
William Ondo, M.D.

Registration is required.
Contact Kathleen Crist, LMSW at 713-626-7114 or crist@hapsonline.org
Do you have Parkinson’s disease and difficulties with problem-solving?

Baylor College of Medicine (BCM) is currently recruiting individuals with mild Parkinson’s disease to participate in a 6-week research study focused on developing skills to help organize information and solve complex problems. This study does not focus on memory problems.

Eligible subjects are:
• Between the ages of 45 and 75
• Fluent in English
• No diagnosis of dementia, and report difficulty with completing complex problems (e.g., finances, medication management, event planning)
• Interested individuals will be evaluated for depression and level of cognitive functioning

What you need to know if interested:
• You will attend the cognitive rehabilitation program for 1.5 hours once a week for 6 weeks
• You will be asked to complete pre- and post-tests that look at your thinking skills to study the potential impact of the program on cognitive functioning
• The 90-minute cognitive rehabilitation group sessions will be held at the BCM McNair Campus. Parking will be validated.

For more information, contact Michele York, PhD, ABPP-CN or Stella Kim, PsyD at stella.kim2@bcm.edu or 713-798-6629.
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