

INFORMATION/EDUCATION PAGE

Eating Well With Parkinson Disease: An Evidence-Based Guide to Nutrition, Digestion, and Swallowing

Target audience

This resource is for people living with Parkinson disease (PD) and their care partners. Eating can become more difficult with PD, especially as the condition changes over time. You may notice changes in how you swallow, how your medications affect your appetite or digestion.

By learning about nutritional tips and practical strategies about constipation, digestion, absorption, and swallowing, you can reduce the prevalence and severity of your symptoms and help your medications work better. This resource is based on clinical practice guidelines and expertise and includes helpful tools and ideas to support you and your family during mealtime.

Why is nutrition important when living with PD?

PD is a progressive neurologic condition that affects many parts of the body, including how you move, eat, and digest. Many people with PD take medications such as levodopa, which help manage symptoms but can also cause side effects that affect eating and digestion.^{1,2} Eating well when living with PD can help you in many ways such as:

- Assist medication to work more effectively.³
- Support your energy levels and daily functioning.

- Prevent or manage constipation and weight loss.
- Improve mood and brain health.

Is it common to feel constipated when living with PD?

- Yes! Constipation is one of the most common symptoms of PD.
- Over 60% of patients with PD experience constipation.⁴
- Constipation is a sign that your gut or your intestines are not working as well as they should be.
- This is often caused by side effects from PD medication, the disease itself, as well as reduced physical activity levels.

How can fiber rich foods help with constipation?

- Fiber is an important part of an individual's diet, with or without PD.
- Fiber comes from plant-based foods such as the skin of an apple, or shells of legumes.
- Your body cannot fully digest some types of fiber (insoluble) that acts as a brush in your intestines, keeping your digestive system moving.
- Eating more fiber, especially insoluble fiber, can help prevent or relieve constipation by making your stool softer and easier to pass.
- Eating a diet that is high in fiber along with drinking lots of water, exercise, and walking is very important.^{4,5}
- Below are a few examples of different fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes that are high in insoluble fiber (Fig 1).

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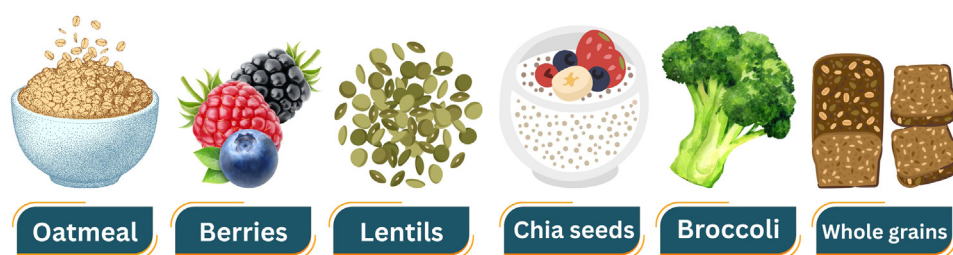


Fig 1 Examples of foods high in insoluble fiber.

How can fermented foods help with constipation?

- Probiotics are “good” bacteria that can improve gut health.
- Eating more probiotics can help your digestive system work more smoothly.
- Fermented foods are made using natural processes where healthy bacteria (probiotics) grow.
- Probiotic foods are especially helpful for managing constipation.⁴
- Eating or drinking small amounts of probiotic rich, fermented foods each day or a few times a week can support digestion.
- Try any of the following foods or drinks to add more probiotics into your diet (Fig 2).

How can hydration and water intake help with constipation?

- Staying hydrated is especially important for people with PD as it can help with symptoms including constipation, low blood pressure, and fatigue.⁴
- Drinking enough fluids helps soften stool and keeps your digestive system moving.
- It can also help prevent drops in blood pressure, which some people with PD experience

when standing up (also called orthostatic hypotension).

- Try sipping water throughout the day rather than drinking a lot all at once.
- Aim to include fluids at each meal and snack, even if you do not feel thirsty.
- You can stay hydrated by eating or drinking any of the following (Fig 3).

How is my nutrient absorption impacted by PD?

- Often, if an individual has troubles with constipation and digestion, they also experience troubles with nutrient absorption.
- Nutrient absorption is important because PD can also increase energy needs, reduce appetite, and lead to weight loss or low body mass index.
- Protein is a very important nutrient in our diet.
- It helps preserve our muscle mass and keeps us healthy.
- Some PD medications use the same pathways as protein to get absorbed into your body.^{1,2}
- Over time, PD and its medications may cause low levels of important vitamins such as vitamin D, B12, and folic acid.⁴ Vitamin D is important for bone strength and mood and vitamin B12 and folic acid are important for energy and brain health.^{4,6,7}



Fig 2 Examples of fermented foods containing probiotics.



Fig 3 Examples of ways to increase water intake and hydration.

What can help with nutrient absorption?

- Talk to a doctor or dietician before making changes to your diet, supplements, or medications.
- When taking PD medications such as levodopa, try taking it on an empty stomach (30-60min before meals or 1-2h after) to improve absorption rates.⁴
- Some people with PD find that having less protein at breakfast and lunch, and more protein at dinner, works better for them.²

Is it common to have difficulties with swallowing food?

- Difficulties with swallowing (dysphagia) is a very common symptom of PD.
- More than 80% of people with PD are diagnosed with dysphagia at some point.^{2,3}
- It can change how one eats, chews, and swallows' food, drinks, and medications.
- Other common PD symptoms that can affect your ability to swallow includes:^{4,6-8}
 - Slowed muscle movement of the oral muscles, jaw rigidity, drooling, decrease in swallowing initiation.
- It is important to see a speech language pathologist (SLP) if you experience challenges

with swallowing while eating (eg, excessive coughing or food going down the wrong pipe) as this could be a sign of dysphagia and can lead to choking, aspiration, and malnutrition.^{2,3}

What do I do if I need help with swallowing?

- Talk to your doctor about the swallowing issues you are experiencing.
- The doctor can make a referral to a SLP or another clinician.
- SLPs can do a swallowing assessment and provide helpful suggestions, exercises, and food textures to help you.
- SLPs often work with other health professionals, to ensure that you can incorporate swallowing techniques into your mealtime habits and routines (Fig 4).

What licensed health care professionals can help me?⁹

- *Speech language pathologists:* can assess your swallowing and may suggest exercises, eating techniques, or food texture changes to reduce the risk of choking or aspiration during meals.

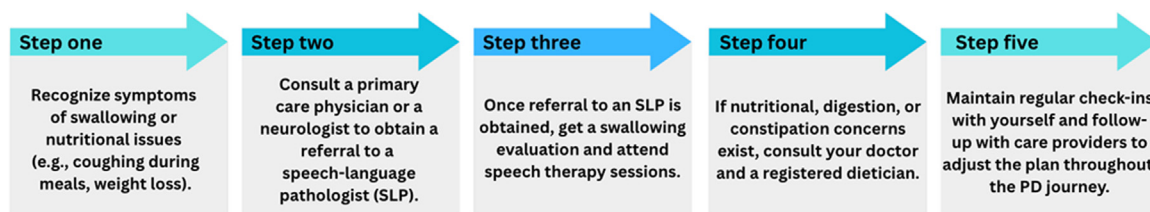


Fig 4 Step-by-step process to obtain referral for speech language pathologist.

- *Dieticians*: provide personalized nutrition advice, help manage constipation, weight regulation, and support healthy eating habits.
- *Occupational therapists*: can help with meal planning, safe eating, adaptive tools, and strategies for easier food preparation and eating, especially if movement or fatigue are challenges.
- *Naturopathic doctors*: may be able to suggest diet, supplement changes, as well as herbal or nontraditional approaches to nutrition.
- *Nutritionists*: may offer general healthy eating tips, but are not licensed providers, meaning that their training and regulation varies, so be sure to check their scope of practice and credentials.

There is no single diet for PD, but with support from your care team and strategies tailored to your needs, you can build habits that help you feel more confident during mealtime.

Authorship

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Disclaimer

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