



Supporting swimmers with Parkinson's or multiple sclerosis

This fact sheet explains how you can support people to take part in swimming and other aquatic activities with Parkinson's or multiple sclerosis.

What is Parkinson's?

Parkinson's is one of the most common degenerative neurological condition affecting 153,000 people in the UK, but particularly in the over 50 age group, although some are diagnosed at a younger age. It is known that a gradual degeneration of cells in an area of the brain that controls movement occurs with Parkinson's, although in most cases the cause of this is unclear. This brings about a reduction in molecules called neurotransmitters which send signals from cell to cell. Over time, this process can lead to symptoms including slowness of movement, stiffness in certain joints and a tremor becoming noticeable leading to investigations and a diagnosis of the condition. It is worth noting that there are other symptoms, for example anxiety or bladder frequency, which can also affect everyday activities. As the condition progresses, some people with Parkinson's find it harder for medication to control their symptoms, so experience periods of unpredictability in their movements over the course of a day.

What is multiple sclerosis?

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is also a common degenerative neurological condition affecting around 150,000 people in the UK with nearly 7,100 being diagnosed each year. The exact cause is unknown, but is likely to be due to a mix of genes, something in the environment and some lifestyle factors.

MS affects the brain and spinal cord, where it damages the coating that protects nerves. This causes unpredictable symptoms like blurred vision and problems with how we move think and feel. Symptoms might come and go with 'relapses' and periods of 'remission', or they might get steadily worse.

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People with Parkinson's may experience:

- Problems with balance.
- Poor co-ordination and slowness of movement, especially more on one side of the body than the other.
- Rigidity (stiffness) in the muscles and joints.
- Muscular tremors.

People with MS may experience:

- Visual problems.
- Numbness and tingling.
- Muscle spasms stiffness and weakness.

With both conditions people may also experience fatigue, mobility problems, pain, problems with thinking, learning and planning, depression and anxiety, sexual problems, bladder and bowel problems, speech and swallowing difficulties. All or any of these symptoms could affect someone's capability or motivation to swim.

How can swimming help with Parkinson's or MS

Being active can offer a range of benefits if you have Parkinson's or MS. This could include muscle strengthening, improved improved heart and lung health, improvements in mood and quality of life and the ability to perform every day activities with less fatigue.

Exercising in water offers a range of unique benefits. Water stabilises and supports their body giving greater freedom and range of movement. This can help to improve their balance – decreasing the ongoing risk of falls and can also provide temporary relief of some aches and pains.

The resistance of water can be helpful in gradually building strength, whilst the pressure of water around the body can help to reduce any swelling and increase the work of the heart, lungs and kidneys, improving the blood supply to the brain and other parts of their body.

Some people may find the cooling effect of water beneficial, particularly in outdoors water spaces. Others may find warmer water can help some of their symptoms for a time afterwards.

Things to consider before, during and after swimming

Before:

- Check to see if the leisure facility can offer a tour beforehand to make sure they can access everywhere safely, for example, is there a ramp or lift available if steps might be harder for them. Some facilities may also have virtual tours that can be watched on their website.
- Advise planning to attend around the least busy times of the day, when there are less people around and therefore less turbulence in the water. This will help with confidence and balance and also allow time and space to do warm up exercises in the pool before swimming.

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- Encourage checking what type of tiles line the bottom of the pool as non-slip, textured tiles may help those who have sensory problems and can't feel the floor well, or if someone's balance and the ability to grip with their feet is affected.
- Asking about specific changing facilities will be important if they might need help from a friend or family member to get changed and check for any space requirements, especially if a wheelchair is needed afterwards.
- If someone is nervous about getting back in the water, they might want to ask a friend or family member to join them. Lots of pools also offer one to one swimming lessons, with swim teachers who have specific training suited to individual needs. Some pools may have a disability swimming club with specialist coaches.
- Swimwear with a separate top and shorts may be easier to change in and out of, particularly once wet, for example a t-shirt or rash vest, with shorts or thin leggings. Most pools let people wear full body coverings in most pools, so check this beforehand.
- People who struggle to dress at home after a bath or shower, should be advised to wear or bring loose clothing that is easier to put on after they have been in the water.
- If their condition has affected bladder and bowel control, advise them to go to the toilet before getting into the pool. Incontinence swimwear is widely available if there are concerns about this. They may be able find something online that suits them, or could ask their continence service for advice.
- If they have problems with speech or swallowing, a buoyant neck collar may help them to feel more confident.
- If they have particularly buoyant or 'floaty' legs, they could try light aqua ankle weights anchor their feet to the floor for upright and walking activities. Advise them to ask for assistance or supervision in the pool if this is the case.
- Pool 'noodles' may be useful to help support people in forward or backward lying positions if they find it difficult to stay afloat. Pools may have equipment available may provide some

guidance around their use and consideration of other swimmers.

- If they take medication, they should be advised to plan what time they go to the pool, so it does not interrupt their normal routine.
- Swimmers might find it better to warm up their muscles and stretch on poolside where it is warmer, before getting into the water, which may prevent their body from becoming tight, particularly if the water temperature is a little low. It is common for pool temperatures to be below 30 degrees Celsius.
- If someone has MS, very warm temperatures can add to fatigue. For example hydrotherapy pools can range from 32-35.5 degrees Celsius, so they may need to try different pools and work out what's best for them.
- Being active in water, particularly in a humid indoor pool area might mean some people won't notice feeling as warm or sweaty. But it's still important to stay hydrated during a

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session. Advise taking some water in an unbreakable bottle to keep near the pool side.

During:

- A towel or swim poncho can help to stay dry from the changing room to the pool and back again, encourage swimmers to ask for help on where items can be kept during their swim.
- Multipoint walking aids are recommended on wet surfaces rather than single point walking aids.
- Aqua shoes may also help on the pool side and even in the pool if they plan to do walking activities.
- Most pools have pool side hoists or lift systems to help get in and out of the pool, particularly if they can't use steps.
- Swimmers might want to make the lifeguard, coach or teacher aware of their condition and any difficulties they might have floating or turning from face down to face up positions. Especially if it is their first time at the pool.
- In the water people may find they are able to move in ways they can't achieve on land. Advise them to gradually explore what they can and can't do by the side of the pool, at first. Holding onto a bar or trough if there is one may help.
- If swimmers find they lack buoyancy or coordination to kick effectively while swimming strokes like front crawl, suggest using a 'pull buoy' to help them keep a streamline position in the water.
- There are different professionals who can help someone find specific activities that might suit them, including: a neurologist or nurse specialist, aquatic physiotherapist, or an exercise professional with an Aquatic Activity for Health qualification.
- It's important to keep warm in the water in between bouts of activity, so encourage swimmers to keep moving when they can. Everyone is different, so they should do what feels right for them, but for example could try walking, forwards, backwards and sideways in water that is just up to their chest. Other movements could be marching on the spot, swinging a leg forwards, backwards and sideways, or doing squats.
- If they get fatigue, encourage them not to try to do too much at once. Advise starting with 10 to 15 minutes at first. Encourage them to see how they feel and gradually build up their time in the pool as they adjust to it.

After:

- When getting out of the water, people might really notice the difference as the buoyancy of the water is taken away. Being wet might add to feeling tired and heavy. So even if they don't use one to get in, they might find using a hoist or lift valuable for getting out.
- A towel or swim poncho or towel can help to stay warm before getting to the changing room. Most pools have somewhere near the poolside to hang a towel or keep a few items they might need.
- Once they are dressed, encourage swimmers to have a drink to replace water lost during exercise. They could also eat a banana or a salty snack to replace salts.
- People who have MS muscle stiffness, might find this stiffness eases from being in the water. If they usually walk

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with a level of stiffness, they might find that they will need some extra help moving around when they first get out. They may find sitting for 10-15 minutes helpful, until their body has adjusted to being back on land again.

Tips for swimming with Parkinson's or MS

- **Do:** encourage them to consult with a healthcare professional beforehand who has knowledge of their condition, such as their GP, physiotherapist, neurologist or nurse specialist, particularly if they have been newly diagnosed and their treatment plans are still being worked out. They may also be able to advise on issues such as muscle stiffness, or co-ordination and how that may affect them in the water.
- **Do:** encourage them to test their ability to manoeuvre their body to regain an upright position, or to turn onto their back if they feel they are sinking before starting to swim, particularly if they have not been in the water for a while.
- **Do:** encourage them to start slowly and build up gradually at their own pace. Advise them to take time after a swim or session to see how their body recovers and perhaps adjust things like effort and duration if they need to on their next visit.
- **Do:** encourage contacting their local pool to find out what other activities they have available, such as:

Aqua Aerobics: group classes of exercise and movements in the pool, often to music, with an instructor leading the class – might be less suitable if their movement is very limited.

Aqua walking: walking around the pool with the water resistance requiring more effort to walk than on land.

Water Wellbeing: sessions provided by instructors who have achieved the 'Aquatic Activity for Health' qualification providing one to one or small group water-based activities tailored for people living with health conditions.

Good Boost: personalised aquatic rehabilitation programmes provided on waterproof tablet computers, with options for group sessions led by a facilitator or individual. Home exercise options are also available.

Aquatic Physiotherapy: supervised exercises, techniques and advice from a specialist physiotherapist in a warm hydrotherapy pool. Apart from the benefits mentioned above, the warmth of the water can be beneficial for some symptoms,, including painful joints or aching muscles.

- **Do:** encourage them to aim for little and often, rather than too much all at once.
- **Do:** advise them to allow themselves recovery time and keep track of any changes in levels of fatigue, spasms, increased tremor or weakness.
- **Do:** encourage them to let their healthcare team know about any changes or new symptoms.

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Specific tips on outdoor swimming with Parkinson's and MS

Swimming regularly in a local pool is a good way of building up someone's fitness and stamina. But if they're thinking of trying open water swimming in a lido, the sea, lake or river, they may need to do some extra training or preparation first.

It is best not to swim alone outdoors, so it might be a good idea to advise them to join a club. Some clubs run introductory courses and training programmes, or can help swimmers to prepare for an event. They will also be able to get advice from other members.

- Outdoor swimming could mean colder water temperatures and possibly greater risks if there's a problem. Advise them to only try outdoor swimming if they are already a competent swimmer.
- **Do:** encourage them to discuss their condition with an instructor or coach beforehand so both have a good idea of their abilities.
- **Do:** advise them to choose appropriate swimwear for the environmental conditions. That could be a wetsuit in colder climates. Wetsuits may also provide extra buoyancy in the water, but do encourage them to think about how difficult it might be for them to get a wetsuit on and off.
- **Do:** encourage them to consider how easy it will be to get in and out of where they swim and make sure help is on hand in case they need it.

If you are swimming abroad:

- **Do:** advise them to take a copy of their prescription and some extra medication in case any get lost or stolen.
- **Do:** encourage swimmers to consider that local pool hygiene standards may be variable and not to assume that outdoor pools will be clean. Check with the pool operator first and if in doubt avoid swimming than risk becoming ill.

Additional information

Moving Medicine: Parkinson's Disease: www.movingmedicine.ac.uk/consultation-guides/patient-info-finder/

Parkinson's UK: Swimming and Parkinson's: www.parkinsons.org.uk/information-and-support/your-magazine/experts/swimming-and-parkinsons

MS Society: MS and Exercise: www.mssociety.org.uk/living-with-ms/physical-and-mental-health/staying-active

Good Boost aquatic and home exercise application: goodboost.ai/

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