

Parkinson's and exercise

Different programs are showing that physical approaches can help ameliorate symptoms

by PAT OLSEN



COSTCO CONNECTION

Costco members will find exercise equipment seasonally at warehouses and year-round on Costco.com. Prescription medications can be obtained at Costco pharmacies.

Exercise has many physical and emotional benefits. Because April is Parkinson's Awareness Month it's a good time to note that research has shown that exercise can be especially helpful for those with Parkinson's disease, a nervous system disorder that can cause tremors, movement difficulties and other symptoms.

One of the largest studies about the effects of exercise on symptoms is the Parkinson's Outcomes Project, funded by the Parkinson's Foundation (parkinson.org).

Miriam Rafferty, a research scientist on the project, says the study found that maintaining regular exercise (two and a half hours per week) was associated with lower declines in mobility and quality of life in people with Parkinson's disease.

"In addition, people who were not exercising enough at first, but started to exercise, also had slower declines compared to people who did not exercise regularly," she says. The study is ongoing, along with a number of others on various types of exercise that might help with Parkinson's.

Dr. Rebecca Gilbert, chief scientific officer of the American Parkinson Disease Association, emphasizes to her patients at Bellevue Hospital in New York that "much of the disease is not in your control, but what is in your control is how physically fit you are when you tackle the disease. People who exercise do better overall."

Boxing

Using exercises adapted from boxing drills, Rock Steady Boxing (rocksteadyboxing.org), a noncontact boxing program, is based on the idea that Parkinson's causes a loss in many of the same abilities that boxers work on, including agility, speed, muscular endurance, accuracy, balance and overall strength.

Costco member Lloyd Leschuk of Little Silver, New Jersey, who attends a boxing program in his town, says, "We're at different stages in my group, but each of us is able to achieve. The camaraderie is important, too. It motivates us."



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Boxing is one discipline that has been found to help deal with Parkinson's disease symptoms.

Forced exercise

Forced exercise is another approach that has been shown to improve symptoms. At Pedaling for Parkinson's (pedalingforparkinsons.org), participants ride stationary bikes in indoor cycling classes at high rates of speed. They bike with an instructor for 60 minutes, three times a week, in a sequence that involves a warmup, more active cycling and a cool-down, all at varying revolutions per minute.

"Within a month, I could move my arms more freely and walk better," says Costco member Nan Little, who attends classes at YMCAs in the Seattle area.

Dancing

Dancing requires timing, balance and a certain level of agility. Led by professional dancers, Dance for PD (danceforpd.org) uses classes developed by Mark Morris Dance Group to integrate modern dance, tap, folk, ballet, social and company repertory (theatrical) dancing.

"Our teachers adapt the material to make it accessible, and at the same time provide participants with an artistic experience," explains David Leventhal, program director.

Multipronged approach

Because one size definitely does not fit all when it comes to treating Parkinson's, OhioHealth's Delay the Disease program (ohiohealth.com; search "delay the disease") consists of Parkinson's-specific exercises, ranging from seated classes to high-intensity interval training, that target disease symptoms and help with daily challenges, such as dressing and getting up from a chair.

Of the program, which has spread across the U.S., Sue Glass says, "Our trainer tells us why we're doing certain movements and what each helps with." The Costco member, who attends classes at The Atlantic Club in Red Bank, New Jersey, adds, "I've seen symptom improvement in myself and in others in the class." ■

Pat Olsen is a freelance writer and author based in New Jersey.

Tips for successful exercise

It can be challenging enough to stay motivated to exercise under the best circumstances, let alone when battling a disease like Parkinson's. Following some of these steps from the American Parkinson Disease Association (apdaparkinson.org) may help.

Choose something you enjoy: It might be easier for you to stick with it.

Partner up: An exercise buddy can make exercise more enjoyable and make you feel more accountable.

Mix it up: Variety is good and reduces boredom.

Look for local classes: Having a class schedule can help with regular participation.

Plan ahead and schedule your exercise: If you treat it like a meeting, you'll be more likely to fit it in.

Note: Consult with your physician or physical therapist before beginning any exercise program.

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