

**T**his disease is characterised by a premature ageing of certain brain cells which are responsible for our movement. It mostly affects the elderly.

### **What to look for**

the disease takes hold slowly, beginning with a sense of weakness and a slight tremor of the head or hands, then gradually progressing to more generalised symptoms. These can include:

- slow, jerky movements; a shuffling gait; and stooped posture.
- unsteady balance.
- continuous movement of the thumb and forefinger as if the person was rolling something between the thumb and fingers.
- obscure speech.
- swallowing problems.
- in severe cases, rigid trunk and limbs; fixed facial expression and unblinking, staring eyes.

Parkinson's disease mostly affects older people. The first signs are likely to be barely noticeable, a weak or stiff limb, perhaps, or a fine trembling of one hand when it is at rest. Usually this worsens over time. Depression and other mental or emotional problems are common.

Usually the disorder begins between the ages of 50 and 65. Medication is often helpful in treating the symptoms and the condition is not life threatening usually.

### **Causes**

In most instances, Parkinson's disease is caused by untimely ageing of brain cells. These cells normally coordinate the muscle activity which allows us to perform specific types of movement. This allows us to do such things as swing our arms when we walk, move our facial muscles and in the positioning of limbs before we stand up or walk. Problems happen when the brain cells that allow the body to perform these tasks die off prematurely.

### **Traditional Treatment**

Most treatments aim at restoring the proper balance of the brain cells affected by this disorder. Drugs are the standard way of doing this, but neurosurgeons have had some success with experiments involving operative procedures.

Symptoms can be effectively controlled for years with medication.

Some treatments focus on the effects of the disorder rather than the causes. Physiotherapists may be able to help with muscle strength and body alignment.

### **Personal Care**

Look at appropriate furniture and fittings that will make it easier for the Parkinson's patient to move around.

### **When to seek further professional advice**

- you suspect either yourself or a friend or family member has the disease.