Building Your Comprehensive PD Care Team
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You may have heard it before: “an interdisciplinary care team is the best approach to Parkinson’s care”. But who is included in this team? What does each care team member do? At the start, it may be that your primary care doctor and neurologist/movement disorders specialist are the only two people you need on your care team. However, over the years, as your needs evolve, your team may grow to include numerous providers. Below are some professionals you might consider who can help you live well with Parkinson’s every day.

A movement disorder specialist (MDS) is a neurologist with additional training in movement disorders. Your MDS will most likely be the person on your medical care team who is most familiar with the full spectrum of Parkinson’s medications and treatments. If you cannot find and MDS close to you, you might consider travelling as you may only need to see your MDS in person once or twice a year, or seeing them via telehealth. Some people choose to have a local neurologist they see regularly and an MDS they follow up with intermittently.

Your primary care physician (PCP) will play an essential role in problems unrelated to Parkinson’s, monitor your general health, and make sure you stay up-to-date on preventive medical screening tests. You should see your PCP regularly to stay current on your medical issues, detect new issues, and prevent future problems.

Nurses are important and are often the first line of access. If your question or concern is a problem they cannot solve, they know who on the team can.

Physical therapists (PT) can help you improve strength, flexibility, and mobility, and it can also decrease stiffness and pain related to Parkinson’s. Early after your diagnosis, they can teach exercises that address any current weaknesses, which will allow you to stay stronger and mobile for longer. By getting an assessment early, your PT will be able to see how your Parkinson’s is progressing over time so they can give you exercises to address areas that may be getting weaker.

Occupational therapists (OT) enable people of all ages to live life to its fullest by helping them promote health and prevent or live better with injury, illness, or disability. OT interventions focus on adapting the environment through modifications, modifying the task, teaching a skill, and educating the person, care partner, and family to increase participation and ability to perform daily activities. OT focuses primarily on activities that are important and meaningful to you.

Speech language pathologists, or speech therapists, can help you speak loudly, pronounce words clearly, speak fluidly, and show facial expression. These rehabilitative professionals can also help you with eating, swallowing issues, saliva management, dry mouth, drool, and more.

Neuropsychologists specialize in the relationship between behavior and brain function. Cognitive impairment and behavioral complications such as depression, anxiety, and apathy can be some of the earliest symptoms people with Parkinson’s notice. If you do, a great first step to treatment is to get evaluated by a...
expertise in many different areas who will listen, respect your input, and with whom you feel comfortable. You, your care partner, and your family need a support system that will be in place for the duration of your journey with disease.

Neurologists are medical doctors who specialize in neurological disorders. They are qualified to assess both the psychological and physical aspects of psychological problems and prescribe medication. Psychiatrists are medical doctors who specialize in mental health. They are qualified to assess both the psychological and physical aspects of psychological problems and prescribe medication. Pharmacists are also a key person in the care team whom you will see often! They will know all the medications you take — those that are related to Parkinson’s and those that aren’t — they will be on the lookout for medication interactions that your primary doctor may not always be aware of. Whenever you’re prescribed a new medicine, be sure to ask your pharmacist if there’s anything you need to know about how it might interact with other meds you’re taking. Pharmacists can also advise about crushing pills, splitting doses, easy-open bottles, and more.

Registered dieticians can help find the best nutritional strategy for you. It is preferred that you see a registered dietician (RD) specializing in working with people with Parkinson’s or other neurological disorders. RDs are usually the most qualified health professionals on nutrition and dietetics, unless your primary care doctor, neurologist, or movement disorder specialist specializes in that field.

Dentists can provide care that is even more critical to the PD population. That’s because Parkinson’s can impact the mouth and jaw and make dental care more challenging. During regular dental exams, often scheduled every six months, your dentist can check for cavities, plaque, tartar, and gum disease and ensure that you are properly caring for your oral health.

Dermatologists should be seen to screen for Melanoma, one type of skin cancer that has been consistently linked to Parkinson’s. Because melanoma is treatable if caught early but can be dangerous if not detected until the later stages, it’s crucial that people with Parkinson’s focus on skin protection and regular skin cancer screenings.

Eye care professionals provide regular eye exams which are essential for screening for eye diseases and preserving your vision. There are several different types of eye physicians: ophthalmologists, medical physicians who have completed four years of medical school followed by four years of residency training in ophthalmology; optometrists, healthcare providers who complete physician training in optometry but who have not attended medical school; and neuro-ophthalmologists, who are neurologists or ophthalmologists with expertise in visual symptoms from neurologic disease.

You, your care partner, and your family need a support system that will be in place for the duration of your journey with Parkinson’s; so, do not wait to reach out and start adopting a holistic approach. Create a team of providers who can offer expertise in many different areas who will listen, respect your input, and with whom you feel comfortable.

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Please contact Matt Reals, Senior Director of Development, at 212-304-7203 or mr3134@columbia.edu

“Don’t count the days, make the days count.”

-Muhammad Ali, diagnosed with PD in 1984