Parkinson's disease: equipment to assist with daily living

Parkinson's disease is a progressive degenerative disorder of the brain affecting the coordination of movement. Symptoms include:

- tremor
- stiffness
- slowness of movement
- instability.

These affect a person’s ability to independently perform everyday activities. Completing tasks may become slower and more difficult.

Occupational therapists and physiotherapists can help a person with Parkinson’s (and their carer) by:

- breaking down complex tasks into small steps
- discussing how to concentrate on one task at a time. For example, not talking when walking.
- demonstrating equipment to help the person live more independently. Since everyone’s experience with Parkinson’s is unique, need for equipment will vary.

Eating and Drinking

If eating or drinking takes time, insulated bowls, plates and mugs will keep food warm. Plates with raised edges help keep food contained. Non-slip mats stabilise crockery.

Cutlery with built up handles is easier to hold. These are available to buy or foam handles can go over existing cutlery. Angled cutlery curves food towards the mouth, reducing the need to lift the elbow out from the body. Swivel forks or spoons may maintain a level position as food is transferred to the mouth.

Weighted cutlery and weighted cups can help with stability against tremor, but they may increase fatigue. Alternatives include cutlery with battery-operated stabilising handles or spoons with deep bowls.

Mugs with two handles make grasping easier. Cups with sufficient nose clearance allow drinking without tipping the head back. If tremor is an issue, try cups with lids and a straw or spout. Straws with a one-way valve are available.
Speech pathologist assessment
It is important to be assessed by a speech pathologist if there are difficulties with:

- swallowing, chewing and drinking
- language and word finding
- speech or voice. This includes assessing the suitability of voice amplifiers which boost the wearer’s vocal volume.

Food Preparation
Various manual, electric and battery-operated jar and can openers are available. Ring pull can openers ease the removal of ring pull can lids. Kettle tippers assist with pouring boiling water without lifting or carrying the kettle, and kitchen trolleys with handbrakes can be used to transport items if the person is unsteady. Vegetable peelers and preparation knives with built up handles or angled blades eliminate strain on smaller joints.

Bathroom
Use a shower chair/stool and/or install grab rails in the shower alcove. If the shower is over the bath, a bath board provides a seat. Use a handheld shower hose and a long-handled bath sponge. Place soap in a bath mitt or bag on a rope to prevent it from falling to the floor. A towel on a chair or a terry towelling robe assists with drying after showering. For additional support, replace towel rails with grab rails.

Toilet
Fixed and portable aids that raise the height of toilet seats are available. Handrails or a toilet seat aid with armrests improve safety and ease of getting on/off the toilet. Bedside commodes eliminate the need to walk to the toilet during the night, or non-spill urinals and bedpans can be placed nearby to avoid having to get out of bed.

Dressing
Sit in a chair with armrests for support and increased balance. If standing, rest a hand on a dressing table or lean against furniture or a wall for additional support. Where possible, dress the most affected side first and undress it last.

Clothes that fasten at the front or have hook-and-loop fastenings are easier to manage, as is clothing with elastic waistbands or made from stretch fabric. Front opening bras or bras that pull over the head or up from the feet may be easier.

Leather-soled shoes provide less friction than rubber, making it easier to walk. Shoes should have low heels and good arch support. Use shoelaces that do not require tying, such as coil laces, and long handled shoe horns to remove shoes.

Sock/stocking aids are useful if reaching down is difficult. A dressing stick can be used to put on/remove coats, shirts and trousers.

Button hooks have a large handle to grasp and assist with buttons, while zips with small rings attached make it easier to grasp the zip.

Seating
A chair with a straight back, armrests and firm seat set to the correct height makes standing easier. Seats can be raised by using blocks under each leg or placing the chair on a platform. Chairs with height-adjustable legs are also available.
**Bedroom**
To assist with turning over in bed, bend the knees, turn the head in the direction of travel and reach across with the opposite arm. Try a firm mattress, a board under the mattress, satin nightwear or satin sheets. Electric beds with an adjustable backrest can be used to raise the head of the bed for reading or sitting. A bed stick can be used to help with sitting up. To reduce the risk of entrapment, ensure the bed stick is secure, with no gap between the mattress and the pole. Follow the provider’s instructions at all times and do not use the bed stick if it is bending or out of position.

**General Household Aids**
Long handled cleaning equipment can be used while sitting. Pick-up reachers pick up small light objects from the floor or a shelf, reducing bending, reaching and the risk of over balancing. Spring assisted scissors are easier to operate. Touch lamps are easier to use than light switches. Replace door and tap handles with levers or use temporary aids to provide more leverage or grip.

**Reading and Writing**
Bookstands can be used to support the weight of a book. E-books (electronic books) may be lighter and make reading easier. ‘Talking books’ read stories aloud. When writing, ‘warm up’ the hands by drawing large loops. Pens with larger grips give more control. Favour printing over cursive. Lined paper helps to maintain the size and neatness of writing and securing the paper with a clipboard will keep it stable. Use a computer or tablet if handwriting is illegible or difficult. With computers, the speed of the pointer, the type and size of mouse or keyboard, and the size of the icons on the display settings can all be changed or a touch screen monitor can be used.

**Telephones**
Big buttons can be easier to use and an answering machine eliminates the need to rush to the phone. Keep a seat by the phone to sit on so that the focus is on one thing at a time. Speaker phones enable the user to speak and listen without having to hold the receiver. Some phones include features that amplify the voice.

**Recreation**
Look for games with larger pieces or lighter parts. Card holders assist with holding playing cards. Use long handled gardening tools to reduce the need to bend, garden stools and kneeling pads with armrests to make standing easier, and ratchet pruners require less effort. For lawn or carpet bowls, use a ‘bowler’s arm’ to pick up and bowl. A bowl and kitty pick up will reduce bending.

**Alarm Systems**
Intercom systems and person to person alarms contact others within the home. Telephone based emergency call systems call for assistance to an outside person.

**Medication Management**
Various medicine organisers are available, including those with reminder alarms. Watches with alarms can also be used. Some record medical history. Pill cutters or tablet crushers make it easier to ensure the correct dosage.
Continence Aids and Equipment
Telephone enquiries and appointments can be made with the Registered Nurse at the Continence Resource Centre (collocated at the Independent Living Centre).
For advice on bowel and bladder problems see your doctor or a continence nurse adviser or ring the National Continence Helpline on 1800 330 066.

Mobility Aids
Mobility aids such as walking frames, manual and powered wheelchairs and scooters assist with balance and conserving energy. There is a walking stick and a four-wheeled walker that have a laser which projects a red line in front of the feet. This provides a visual cue for a user affected by freezing to step over and resume walking. It is advisable to have an assessment by a health professional to ascertain whether a mobility aid is appropriate and which type is most suitable.

Falls Prevention and Energy Conservation
For information about falls prevention or conserving energy, contact the Independent Living Centre.

Parkinson’s SA Inc
Parkinson’s SA Inc provides support services for people with Parkinson’s disease and their families/carers.
Phone 8357 8909
Email info@parkinsonssa.org.au

Contacting the Independent Living Centre
For further information or to make an appointment to visit the display please contact the Independent Living Centre. The Independent Living Centre offers free advice on equipment and techniques to help you with everyday tasks.

Independent Living Centre
11 Blacks Road
Gilles Plains SA 5086
Phone 1300 885 886 (SA & NT callers only) or 8266 5260
Email ilcsa@sa.gov.au
Accessible off street parking is available.
Bus services run nearby. Call 8210 1000 for timetable information.