

How Solo Agers Can Live Safely With Parkinson's Disease

For older adults who live alone, managing a major health diagnosis like Parkinson's disease (PD) presents unique challenges. PD is a progressive neurological disorder that primarily affects movement, but it can also impair cognition. A solo ager recently informed of a PD diagnosis might expect to be told that they should move to an assisted living community right away. That may be necessary in the longer term, but depending on the extent of their impairment, they may be able to continue living alone longer than they might expect.

Understanding and Adapting to Parkinson's Disease Challenges

The journey with PD begins with recognizing the specific ways it affects movement—such as tremors, stiffness, and slowing of movement (bradykinesia)—and cognition, including changes in memory and processing speed. As with any diagnosis, acknowledging that these changes will happen is an important first step. Acceptance might not come easily, but it is critical to planning for the future.

Adjustments in living environments and routines, particularly focusing on exercise and diet, can significantly impact quality of life. Tailored exercises, such as yoga, tai chi, or even boxing, can enhance flexibility and balance, while a diet rich in fiber can combat PD-related digestive issues.

Creating a Safe Living Space for Better Mobility

Older adults may already have made home modifications to accommodate their changing



needs or mobility. These adaptations are especially important for someone who's living with PD. Adapting the home should include:

- Removing potential trip hazards such as loose rugs and clutter.
- Ensuring rooms, hallways, and entries are well lit.
- Installing grab bars in critical areas like the bathroom.
- Switching to lever-style door handles and adaptive kitchen tools.

Technology can help with safety in a lot of ways. For example, a personal emergency response system (PERS) can be a lifesaver, providing the means to call for help at the press of a button. Pill organizers and electronic reminders can help manage the strict medication schedules that Parkinson's often necessitates. Wearables that track health data and smart home devices may also help.

Building a Support Network When Aging Solo With PD

Building a support network is equally important. This may include finding a support group, seeing a therapist, or relying on friends, loved ones, or the senior's faith community for help and encouragement.

“Don't be afraid to find a therapist RIGHT NOW,” wrote one person living with PD in a Reddit discussion on the topic. “Even if you don't have insurance [for therapy],” another writer said, “there are almost always other low[-cost] or free resources available.”

The Parkinson's Foundation has a free PD Solo Network that is “intended for individuals diagnosed with Parkinson's disease who live alone, by choice or circumstance – only.” It meets via Zoom twice a month. Solo agers with PD may also find a local support group that meets in person. Whether they meet online or in person, support groups can provide both emotional support and practical advice, helping participants navigate the complexities of the disease.

Home health aides or in-home care services can assist with personal care and household tasks, reducing the strain and risk associated with daily activities.

Aging With PD: Preparing for the Future

As independence becomes more challenging, having legal and medical directives in place becomes essential. Anyone living with PD should put these plans and documents on their priority list:

- ▶ A health care power of attorney names a trusted individual (the “proxy”) to make medical decisions when the person with PD is no longer able to do so. Similarly, a living will can articulate one's wishes regarding medical treatment in various scenarios, including their preferences about the use of life support.
- ▶ A financial power of attorney names a trusted person who is allowed to manage financial affairs, which becomes crucial if handling money and daily financial decisions becomes too difficult.

An elder law attorney can help prepare these documents and others, such as estate plans and wills.

Organizing and securely storing all important documents, plus insurance policies, personal IDs, etc., is a great help for both the person living with PD and their designated proxies. The power of attorney documents should be shared with the proxies and, in the case of health care powers of attorney, with the primary health care providers.

Do Some Parkinson's-Related Research

If you are a solo ager with a recent PD diagnosis, organizations like the Parkinson's Foundation and the Michael J. Fox Foundation are invaluable resources. They offer up-to-date information and connections to information and support services.

Now is also a good time to start thinking about when in-home help may be needed, or when living alone may no longer be viable. Right at Home's trained in-home care experts can help manage Parkinson's disease symptoms. Visit assisted living communities and memory care units to learn about what they offer and how much they will cost. The expertise of a financial planner can help with long-term planning.

Preserving Independence and Dignity When Aging With PD

With preparation, living alone with Parkinson's can remain a viable option for many, helping to preserve independence and dignity even as the disease progresses.



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