Information for patients from JNNP

Can people with Parkinson’s disease drive safely?

Even people with mild Parkinson’s disease may have impaired driving skills, a new study has shown, using a driving simulator.

What do we know already?

Parkinson’s disease causes an array of symptoms, including movement disorders and cognitive difficulties. Movement disorders are better known, but many people with Parkinson’s disease have cognitive problems too, such as poor working memory, trouble making plans or solving problems, and difficulty in adapting quickly to fast-changing circumstances.

All these cognitive abilities are important for a situation like driving. While many people with Parkinson’s disease have to stop driving because of movement disorders, the effect of cognitive problems on driving are less well studied.

This new study compared the response of 25 people with mild to moderate Parkinson’s disease, and 25 people without, to a range of tests and driving simulation tasks. The people with Parkinson’s were matched to people of similar ages and driving experience.

What does the new study say?

People with Parkinson’s disease had more difficulty remembering recently seen road signs, in the driving simulation test, compared to people without Parkinson’s. But on other tests – such as braking when a car in front braked – they performed just as well.
How reliable are the findings?
The study was small, with only 25 people in each group. Also, the people with Parkinson’s disease all had relatively mild disease and were still driving regularly. We don’t know what the results might have been with a wider range of people with Parkinson’s.

What does this mean for me?
The study shows that, even among people with mild Parkinson’s who are regularly driving, the disease can have a negative affect on people’s ‘working memory’. This is the constantly updated memory we use in tasks where we have to keep adjusting to new situations without forgetting what’s already happened. In the driving situation tested, it meant that people were unable to remember the speed limit on the sign they’d just seen, or know whether they could overtake on a particular stretch of road. This could make driving hazardous.

What should I do now?
If you are unsure whether or not you are safe to drive, talk to your doctor. There are tests that can help assess whether your driving abilities are impaired.

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