

## Information for patients from JNNP

# Apathy is a common sign of worsening Parkinson's disease

The development of apathy is a sign of worsening Parkinson's disease, a study has found. The study suggests that apathy is due to changes in the brain, caused by the disease and by ageing.

### What do we know already?

Apathy, generally defined as a lack of interest or concern about life, is relatively common among people with Parkinson's disease. A previous study found that about 38 in 100 people with Parkinson's disease exhibit apathy at any one time.

We also know that it's more common in people with Parkinson's disease who are showing signs of dementia, such as memory loss and confusion. It's also more common among people with Parkinson's disease who've become depressed. But doctors aren't sure how these things are related, or in what order they tend to happen.

This new study followed a group of 79 patients with Parkinson's disease over a 4-year period. It measured their levels of apathy, depression and mental skills at the start of the study, and again at the end.

### What does the new study say?

The study showed that people were likely to become apathetic during the four years of the study, and that this was linked to depression and dementia. Only 14 per cent of patients were apathetic at the start of the study. They were also more likely to have been diagnosed with depression and dementia at this time. During the study, another 40 per cent of patients developed apathy, and they too were more likely to have depression and dementia by the end of the study. No-one with apathy at the start of the study had recovered from it by the end of the study.

Mostly, depression and dementia seemed to happen before apathy. People who had been depressed or showed signs of dementia at the start of the study were more likely to be apathetic by the end of the study. But people who were apathetic at the start of the study were not especially likely to develop depression or dementia, if they didn't already have them.

### How reliable are the findings?

This is a fairly small study, so the findings should be treated with some caution. The results might have been different in a bigger group of patients.

### Where does the study come from?

The researchers were from Stavanger University Hospital and the University of Bergen, both in Norway.

### What does this mean for me?

If you have Parkinson's disease or you care for someone with Parkinson's disease, it's important to know that symptoms like depression and apathy are part of the disease process. Although the figures in the study seem quite bleak, not everyone in the study developed these conditions. More than a third had not become apathetic by the end of the study. Remember these are just statistics, and they can't predict what will happen to you or your loved one.

### What should I do now?

It's not easy caring for someone with Parkinson's disease. If you are struggling, your doctor should be able to help you find out about local support for carers. If you've noticed the person you care for seems to be losing interest in life, it may help to know that this is a symptom of the disease. It's not anything personal, and it hasn't been caused by anything that you have or haven't done. Talking to other carers for people with Parkinson's disease may also help.

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Occurrence and risk factors for apathy in Parkinson disease: a 4-year prospective longitudinal study. Authors: Pedersen KF, Alves G, Aarsland D, *et al.* *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery & Psychiatry*. 2009;**80**:1279-1282. <http://jnnp.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/80/11/1279>

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