ABOUT PARKINSON’S DISEASE

• Parkinson’s disease (PD) is a disorder of the central nervous system characterized by impairment or death of dopamine-producing cells in the brain. The disease causes a variety of symptoms related to muscle movement, including rigidity, delayed movement, poor balance, and tremors. Non-motor symptoms include sleep disturbances, urinary dysfunction, constipation, swallowing problems, mood disorders, and cognitive deficits.

• The exact cause of PD is unknown. Most researchers agree that the disease is caused by both genetic and environmental factors, and by interactions between the two. There is no cure for PD—however, many effective medications and treatment options are available.

• The Parkinson’s Foundation estimates that PD affects nearly 1 million Americans. People typically develop Parkinson’s when they are about 60 years old, although 5% to 10% develop early-onset PD. VA estimates that 110,000 Veterans have PD.

• In 2010, VA recognized PD as a presumptive service-connected disorder associated with Agent Orange or other herbicide exposures during military service. Veterans with PD who were exposed to herbicides during their service may be eligible for disability compensation and health care. In 2021, VA added atypical Parkinsonism to the list of Agent Orange-associated conditions.

VA RESEARCH ON PARKINSON’S DISEASE

• In 2001, VA created six specialized centers to provide Veterans state-of-the-art clinical care, known as the Parkinson’s Disease Research, Education, and Clinical Centers (PADRECCs).

• The centers also provide comprehensive diagnosis and treatment services for other movement disorders, including essential tremor, restless leg syndrome, dystonia, Lewy body dementia, progressive supranuclear palsy, multiple system atrophy, and corticobasal degeneration.

• In 2020, VA and the Parkinson’s Foundation formed a partnership to improve the health and well-being of Veterans living with PD. The collaboration is designed to ensure Veterans living with PD have access to the information and resources they need to better manage their health.

• The partnership has three primary goals: to increase access to PD information, resources, and providers; educate Veterans and providers on PD management and best practices; and help Veterans navigate Parkinson’s-related health and social services.

SELECTED MILESTONES AND MAJOR EVENTS

2001 – Created six VA PADRECCs

2003 – Initiated a landmark clinical trial to assess the effectiveness of deep brain stimulation (DBS) for PD

2009 – Determined that DBS may hold significant benefits for people with PD who no longer respond to medication

2014 – Found that walking is a safe and accessible way to improve PD symptoms

2015 – Developed a procedure to convert fibroblasts into dopamine neurons

2017 – Found that DBS in PD patients gives a slight survival advantage

2019 – Found that fatigue in PD patients may be a result of lower diastolic blood pressure

2020 – Teamed up with the Parkinson’s Foundation to support Veterans living with PD

RECENT STUDIES: SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS

• Loneliness is linked to worsening PD symptoms, according to a VA PADRECC
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