Acting out Dreams and Parkinson’s Risk: Three Things to Know

We all dream when we sleep. While most don’t remember dreams, some unintentionally act out dreams. They may kick, punch, yell or even fall out of bed while sleeping. This condition, known as REM sleep behavior disorder (RBD) is linked to an increased risk of Parkinson’s disease (PD). Not everyone with RBD gets Parkinson’s disease. But in some people, RBD is one of the earliest symptoms of PD. Here are three things to know about Parkinson’s risk if you act out your dreams.
Acting out dreams increases risk but doesn’t guarantee Parkinson’s.

Normally when we dream, our brain prevents our muscles from moving. In some, these brain signals don’t work properly, and a person moves while dreaming. This is REM sleep behavior disorder. People with RBD often have very active dreams in which they’re playing sports, running, or even being chased or attacked.

RBD is more common in men, people aged 50 or older, and those who live with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Certain medications, such as antidepressants, also can contribute to RBD.

While RBD can be one of the earliest symptoms of Parkinson’s, not everyone with RBD gets PD. Still, learning about this connection is, understandably, worrisome. At the same time, many say knowing this risk helps them take positive steps to care for themselves and their brains as best they can through regular exercise, healthy eating and participating in research.

A sleep doctor can help if you or your loved one act out dreams.

If you act out your dreams, a doctor who specializes in sleep can help you figure out why. RBD is one reason for talking, yelling or moving during sleep, but there are others. Each sleep condition has a different treatment and prognosis. Ask your primary doctor for a recommendation or referral to a sleep doctor.

Your evaluation may include an overnight sleep study, which monitors your brain and muscle activity while you sleep. If you have RBD, your physician can prescribe medications, such as melatonin or clonazepam, and suggest strategies for safer sleeping. These may include sleeping on a low bed or mattress on the floor, in a sleeping bag, or separately from your partner, just until symptoms are controlled. This can, of course, be a tough adjustment for many couples.

People who act out dreams can help prevent Parkinson’s disease.

People with RBD can help scientists understand who develops Parkinson’s, how it comes on from the very earliest stages, and why. This information could point to ways to diagnose the disease earlier and more accurately, better treatments for symptoms, and therapies to prevent Parkinson’s.

The Parkinson’s Progression Markers Initiative (PPMI) aims to prevent Parkinson’s disease. The study is gathering data and experiences of people who act out their dreams and others, both with and without PD. To learn more and connect with the PPMI team, call 877-525-PPMI or email joinppmi@michaeljfox.org.

Join the study that could change everything.

Read more about other Parkinson’s risk factors such as aging, having a family member with Parkinson’s, veteran status and Ashkenazi Jewish descent in our Better Brain Health guide.