Accessible product design

Accessible design means creating products and packaging that are easy to use for everyone, regardless of age, ability, or health condition.

Everyday tasks like opening a jar, using a kettle, or reading a medication label can become unexpectedly difficult with conditions like Parkinson's. That's why accessible product design is so important.

What is accessible product design?

Accessible design means creating products, packaging, and spaces that are easy for everyone to use, regardless of age, ability, or health condition. For people with Parkinson's, symptoms like tremors, stiffness, and reduced fine motor skills can make it hard to open containers, fasten buttons, or manage their medications. Furthermore, our strength and dexterity will reduce as we age over sixty, making many types of packaging harder to open.

These challenges are not just frustrating; they can affect independence, safety, and quality of life. That's why accessible product design is so important. Accessible design helps by making these tasks easier, so you can stay independent and confident in your daily life.

Common product challenges for people with Parkinson's

According to the APDA's position statement, people with Parkinson's often struggle with:

- Heavy or awkward items like kettles, pots, and vacuum cleaners
- Hard-to-open packaging such as medication bottles, food containers, and cleaning products
- Small or unclear labels that are difficult to read due to tremors or vision changes
- Complex controls on appliances or electronics require fine motor skills.

These issues can lead to physical pain, frustration, and even injury. In some cases, people may avoid using certain products altogether, which can affect nutrition, hygiene, and wellbeing.

What needs to change?

The APDA is calling for:

- Inclusive design standards to be adopted across industries
- Consumer testing that includes people with chronic conditions
- Clear labelling and instructions that are easy to read and understand
- Training for designers and manufacturers on accessible design principles
- Accessible design isn't just a "nice to have", it's a necessity. And with Australia's ageing population and rising rates of chronic illness, the need for inclusive products is only growing.

© 2025 Parkinson's Australia

What the research says

Accessible packaging not only benefits individuals with Parkinson's but also reduces the need for caregiver assistance, promoting autonomy and dignity in daily tasks like preparing meals or taking medication.

Parkinson's can affect both vision and cognitive processing. Packaging that uses large fonts, high-contrast colours, and minimal clutter helps users more easily identify products and instructions.

A study on packaging usability found that people with Parkinson's prefer rigid containers that don't collapse when handled, and wide openings that allow for easier access without requiring precise hand movements.

Research shows that people living with Parkinson's often struggle with fine motor control, making it difficult to open tightly sealed or slippery packages. Packaging with textured surfaces, larger tabs, and easy-peel seals can reduce frustration and increase independence.

We encourage industry leaders, designers, and everyday consumers to support accessible design and to listen to the voices of people living with Parkinson's and other chronic conditions.

To learn more or get involved, visit the Accessible Product Design Alliance and watch the Unboxing Accessibility series on YouTube.

References

Leroi, I., McDonald, K., Pantula, H., & Harbishettar, V. (2012). Cognitive impairment in Parkinson disease: Impact on quality of life, disability, and caregiver burden. Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry and Neurology, 25(4), 208–214. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891988712464822

Martinez-Martin, P., Rodriguez-Blazquez, C., Forjaz, M. J., & Frades-Payo, B. (2015). Caregiver burden in Parkinson's disease. Movement Disorders, 30(7), 924–931. https://doi.org/10.1002/mds.26183

Weil, R. S., Schrag, A. E., Warren, J. D., Crutch, S. J., Lees, A. J., & Morris, H. R. (2016). Visual dysfunction in Parkinson's disease. Brain, 139(11), 2827–2843. https://doi.org/10.1093/brain/aww175

Kudlicka, A., Clare, L., & Hindle, J. V. (2011). Executive functions in Parkinson's disease: Systematic review and meta-analysis. Movement Disorders, 26(13), 2305–2315. https://doi.org/10.1002/mds.23868

Yoxall, A., Langley, J., Janson, R., & Hirsch, M. (2010). How wide do you want the opening? The effect of container design on ease of access for older users. Applied Ergonomics, 41(6), 856–862. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apergo.2010.02.006

Berardelli, A., Rothwell, J. C., Thompson, P. D., & Hallett, M. (2001). Pathophysiology of bradykinesia in Parkinson's disease. Brain, 124(11), 2131–2146. https://doi.org/10.1093/brain/124.11.2131

Infosheet kindly reviewed by the Accessible Product Design Alliance. Arthritis Australia's Accessible Design Division is dedicated to educating and providing decision-making resources to both industry and government at the design and procurement level, ensuring that the needs and capabilities of the broader community are recognised and understood. The Division offers several testing services to meet clients' needs along the design process, as well as Ease of Use Certification for products and Easy to Open Certification for packaging.

ACCESSIBLE PRODUCT DESIGN ALLIANCE

© 2025 Parkinson's Australia