PingPongParkinson (Table tennis for Parkinson's)

Staying active with Parkinson's through ping pong is a fun way to exercise and socialise with heaps of additional benefits.

Table tennis offers physical, cognitive, and emotional benefits that can help manage symptoms and improve quality of life.

Why is table tennis good for people living with Parkinson's?

Table tennis, also known as ping pong, is a racquet sport played by millions worldwide. Table tennis is more than just a fun game; it's a great way to support both physical and mental health. It combines movement, coordination, and thinking skills, making it especially helpful for people living with Parkinson's. A recent review found that playing table tennis can improve balance, body strength, and coordination, while also lowering the risk of heart problems. It helps with movement and thinking skills like quick reactions, planning, and memory. Research shows that it can be beneficial for people with Parkinson's, dementia, or mild memory loss. Table tennis also boosts mental wellbeing by reducing stress and helping people feel more connected and confident through social play and enjoyment.

It is also likely to be beneficial for the same reasons as other forms of exercise, which include:

- effects of increasing mitochondrial respiration
- antioxidant protection
- stimulation of neuroplasticity and neurotrophic factors that may be protective of dopamine-producing neurons
- improvements in strength, balance and gait.

A 6-month prospective study on table tennis for people with Parkinson's (Inoue et al, 2021) also found improvement in activities of daily living and motor symptoms after 3 and 6 months of participation in a 6-hour exercise session weekly. Anecdotally, table tennis players with Parkinson's feel physical, mental and emotional benefits, as reported by PingPongParkinson participants in Queensland and many others around the world.

Dr. Elana Clar, a neurologist at Hackensack University Medical Center in New Jersey, and co-coordinator and advisory board member of the New Jersey chapter of PingPongParkinson, has reported the following:

"Ping-pong has clearly been shown to have a positive impact on the progression of the disease, in a way that the medication alone is not doing. While all forms of exercise are beneficial, the thing that makes ping-pong unique is that it incorporates a focus on balance, hand-eye coordination, and the rhythm or pace of reciprocal play. So it really hits the trifecta of physical, cognitive and social activities."

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What should I know before I start?

Talk to your care team: Before starting any new activity, check with your GP, neurologist, or physiotherapist. They can help you decide if ping pong is right for your current symptoms and fitness level.

You can do it sitting down: Many Parkinson's-friendly programs offer seated table tennis options. Players can remain in their wheelchairs or sit in chairs while playing. Adaptations include:

- **No need to retrieve balls –** volunteers or ball collection systems help.
- **Assistance with movement –** facilitators may help guide players to the table or support them during play.
- **Modified rules –** games can be slower-paced, with larger paddles or softer balls to suit mobility and coordination needs.

You can do it by yourself: Solo play is possible and useful for building confidence, maintaining routine, and improving motor skills between group sessions. Options include:

- **Rebound boards or return walls –** these allow the ball to bounce back for continuous solo practice.
- **Ball machines –** some programs use automatic ball feeders to simulate gameplay.
- **Drills and exercises –** solo sessions can focus on hand-eye coordination, reflexes, and rhythm, which are all helpful for managing Parkinson's symptoms.

Start slow and steady: Begin with short sessions and simple movements. Many programs include warm-ups and stretching to help prevent injury.

Look for Parkinson's-friendly programs: Some clubs and community centres offer adapted ping pong sessions designed for people with Parkinson's. These often include coaching, slower-paced games, and support from volunteers.

Use the right equipment: Comfortable shoes, a stable playing surface, and lightweight paddles can make a big difference. Some players use modified tables or barriers to help with movement and safety.

Expect ups and downs: Parkinson's symptoms can vary day to day. Some players report feeling better during and after playing, while others may need breaks or adjustments depending on fatigue or stiffness.

What is PingPongParkinson?

PingPongParkinson® (PPP) is a movement that has reached 30 countries, established in 2017 by Croatian-American musician Nenad Bach. After a 35-year music career, including performances with Pavarotti and Bono, two Number 1 albums and a million records sold, Nenad faced potentially career-ending impacts of Parkinson symptoms. However, he discovered that after playing ping pong regularly for a few months, his guitar-playing abilities returned and evaluation by his neurologist confirmed signs of clinical improvement. Nenad describes his story powerfully in his TEDx Talk in 2024. PingPongParkinson leverages the unique benefits of table tennis and the power of community to slow the progression of PD, overcome fear of the condition and improve quality of life.

Infosheet kindly written by PingPongParkinson®, visit www.pingpongparkinson.org

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