

Understanding Drooling in Parkinson's Disease

Poor control of saliva is known as **sialorrhea** and can be a non-motor symptom in people with Parkinson's disease (PD). This problem may be mild and result in a simple issue such as a wet pillow in the morning. In some cases, however, the problem can be severe and cause excessive drooling, which can result in significant embarrassment and social isolation. In addition, saliva can pool in the mouth causing aspiration, or accidental entry of saliva into the lungs, which could lead to pneumonia.

Some people with PD have problems controlling saliva because swallowing is less frequent, due to the general slowness of movement that accompanies PD. In addition, a person with PD may have less control over the muscles of the oral cavity and face, leading to a delay in the person's ability to trigger a swallow when necessary.

An additional problem that some people with PD report is saliva that is too thick, making it difficult to manage.

The good news is that there are some effective options for improving drooling issues.

Solutions to Drooling

Non-pharmacological approaches

Chewing gum or sucking on a hard candy may be helpful for certain people to stimulate more frequent swallowing. Speech and swallow therapy can be helpful, although gains are typically difficult to maintain. Therapy will emphasize:

- Making sure that your neck is in an upright position
- Consciously remembering to swallow before you open your mouth to speak or eat
- Cueing yourself to swallow frequently
- Focusing on keeping your lips together
- Keeping the head of the bed raised at night, or lying on your side when you sleep

Certain medications can increase saliva production. Clozapine, which is sometimes prescribed for psychosis in PD, is one of these medications. Be sure

to review your medications with your doctor since it is possible that one of your medications is contributing to the problem of sialorrhea.

Some people with PD find that their saliva is too thick and therefore difficult to manage. Non-pharmacological approaches to thick saliva include:

- Staying well hydrated and drinking frequently; carbonated fluids and ice chips can be helpful
- Trying sour or tart foods, as well as soft, moist foods to thin the saliva

Medications

- **Oral medications.** Anti-cholinergic medications such as benztropine, scopolamine, glycopyrrolate, and ipratropium bromide can cause dry mouth and can therefore be useful to control drooling. Unfortunately, because these medications are ingested by mouth and are distributed via the blood stream, they can also cause effects in other parts of the body such as urinary retention, constipation, and blurry vision. Therefore, these medications need to be used with caution. Scopolamine and benztropine can also cross the blood-brain barrier and cause side effects such as drowsiness and confusion. Some physicians prescribe atropine ophthalmic drops (another anti-cholinergic medication) to be placed under the tongue to control drooling. This method is meant to deliver the anti-cholinergic effects more locally, thereby preventing anti-cholinergic side effects in other parts of the body. However, this too must be used with caution as effects can still be widespread, and much care needs to be taken to deliver only 1-2 drops under the tongue at a time.
- **Botulinum toxin injections** into the salivary glands can decrease production of saliva and thereby decrease drooling. They have become a common and effective method of controlling saliva with minimal side effects when administered correctly.

There are three sets of salivary glands in the human body: the parotid glands (in the cheek), the sublingual glands (under the tongue), and the submandibular glands (under the jaw). Parotid

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injections are the most straightforward to perform and are typically administered by a movement disorder physician during a routine office visit. If these injections are not sufficient to control the drooling however, the next step is to try botulinum toxin injections of the sublingual and/or submandibular salivary glands. This is a more specialized procedure and may require a visit to an Ear, Nose, and Throat (ENT) specialist.

It is important to note that botulinum toxin not only decreases saliva production but can also weaken muscles, including the muscles needed for swallowing. Botulinum toxin injections are therefore not a treatment for swallow dysfunction and can in fact cause swallow dysfunction. The parotid gland in the cheek is far enough away from the swallowing muscles that impairment of swallowing is typically not a side effect, although it can be in rare cases. Sublingual and submandibular salivary glands are in closer proximity to the swallowing muscles, so injections of these salivary glands have a higher risk of causing swallowing dysfunction. Therefore, only someone trained specifically in these injections should perform them.

Types of botulinum toxin on the market

There are seven different types of botulinum toxin. Two of them, called “A” and “B,” are available for medical use; the others are not. There are three formulations of botulinum toxin A: AbobotulinumtoxinA, IncobotulinumtoxinA, and OnabotulinumtoxinA; and one of botulinum toxin B, RimabotulinumtoxinB. Each of these products differs slightly in their purity and dosing. Two of these preparations, IncobotulinumtoxinA and RimabotulinumtoxinB, are FDA-approved specifically for chronic sialorrhea. The other two, AbobotulinumtoxinA and OnabotulinumtoxinA, have been tested less rigorously for drooling, but some practitioners use these formulations off-label for drooling as well, even though that isn't what the medication was officially approved for. Below is a table that outlines the botulinum toxin products that are commercially available.

Toxin	Brand name	FDA approved for sialorrhea?
Botulinum toxin A		
AbotulinumtoxinA	Dysport®	No
IncobotulinumtoxinA	Xeomin®	Yes
OnabotulinumtoxinA	Botox®	No
Botulinum toxin B		
RimabotulinumtoxinB	Myobloc®	Yes

If drooling is a problem for you, be sure to talk with your doctor about it, as there may very well be a solution to improve the situation.

National Headquarters

American Parkinson Disease Association
PO Box 61420
Staten Island, NY 10306

Telephone: 800-223-2732

Website: www.apdaparkinson.org

Email: apda@apdaparkinson.org

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