

Michael J. Fox still pushing to find Parkinson's cure

Karen Weintraub, Special for USA TODAY 4:21 p.m. EDT September 24, 2013

Parkinson's patients like Michael J. Fox are hopeful, but there still is no cure.



(Photo: Eric Liebowitz NBC)

Actor Michael J. Fox once predicted that he would be cured of Parkinson disease's long before his 50th birthday. "I know I won't have this. I will not have it," he told Barbara Walters on national television.

Now, 52, Fox is far from cured.

Yet this week, more than a dozen years after leaving the TV series *Spin City* because he could no longer hide his declining health, he is returning on Thursday to star in *The Michael J. Fox Show*. (9 p.m. ET/PT on NBC).

Instead of hiding his symptoms, this time he is celebrating them, starring as a fictional TV anchor and dad who has Parkinson's, making jokes about his shaking hands, poor motor control and other people's reactions to his disability.

"We're not making fun of Parkinson's, we're examining a life that has Parkinson's and just how one guy deals with it," Fox says in a video about the new show.

"It's part of the human experience. You can't cower from it, you can't hide from it. You have to accept it, incorporate it into your life. If you have a loving, full life, it'll just be part of it, just one of the colors of the palette."

In a way, not much has changed in the 15 years since Fox first publicly acknowledged that he had the disease and the 22 years since his diagnosis. Most patients still rely on a medication, levodopa, first tested on Parkinson's the year Fox was born.

In other ways — and much to Fox's credit, many people say — our understanding of the disease has been transformed since his diagnosis, bringing research closer to a cure even as scientists acknowledge that it will be far harder to achieve than they once believed.

The Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research, which he started in May 2000, has raised more than \$350 million. Its mission has been the same since it's founding: Find a cure and find it fast.

"Michael was very clear that the goal is to make progress for patients, do it quickly, cut all the red tape," says Todd Sherer, the foundation's CEO.

Parkinson's, which affects about 1 million Americans, most older than 50, is believed to be caused by the gradual loss of the brain chemical dopamine, leading to distorted brain signals that cause the characteristic tremors, muscle rigidity and slowed movements, Sherer says. Symptoms vary widely and advance at different speeds.

Like Fox, Soania Mathur's first instinct upon diagnosis was to hide her disease. She was 26, pregnant with her first child, and just beginning her career as a family physician. Fox was the only young person Mathur knew of with Parkinson's, and she looked to him as a role model, she says.

Mathur, now 42, lives near Toronto; like most Parkinson's patients she takes L-dopa, which was described as miraculous when it was first used because it restored people who had practically turned to statues.

"It's very fine balance between getting the effect you want (from L-dopa) and the side effects, which can be as debilitating as the disease itself," she says.

The longer the disease progresses, the harder it is to get the dosage right and avoid such side effects as involuntary movements, says Jon Palfreman, a journalist and social media editor for the *Journal of Parkinson's Disease*, who is writing a book about his own experience with the disease.

Delivery of L-dopa has improved since Fox's diagnosis, so patients with advanced disease don't swing wildly from periods of being frozen to times when their bodies move out of their control, says Bernard Ravina, medical director of translational neurology at the Massachusetts-based drug company Biogen Idec.

"Just in span of last 10 years, the waiting rooms looks different," because of these changes, Ravina says.

Still, the only major new treatment in the last two decades is deep-brain stimulation, in which electrodes are implanted inside the brain to partially override the distorted signals that lead to the disease's tremors, stiffness and slowness. Like L-dopa, it only treats symptoms, and can't slow or stop the disease.

Another recent advance, according to Irene Richard, a neurologist at the University of Rochester, is the attention now being paid to the emotional and mental toll of Parkinson's. Roughly half of Parkinson's patients are depressed, likely as a symptom of the condition.

Scientists also now have a deeper understanding of the disease and what might be done to slow or stop it. The main bad actor seems to be a common protein called alpha-synuclein, which forms sticky toxins that jump from cell to cell inside the brain, killing neurons as they go. Experimental drugs and vaccines that target this protein are being tested in patients.

"The idea of prevention or a cure is really not absurd anymore," Palfreman says.

Early signs of Parkinson's:

Many of these symptoms are common to many conditions, and one alone is not enough to justify fear of Parkinson's, according to Richard, but a combination is cause for concern — and a trip to the doctor.

- Loss of the sense of smell.
- Constipation, particularly in men.
- Acting out dreams: people who go on to develop Parkinson's commonly report that have begun punching their bed partner if they dream about a brawl, or falling out of bed if they are being chased.
- Tremors or slowed movements.

Researchers are trying to combine these physical symptoms with biochemical indicators in the blood or urine in order to diagnose Parkinson's early when treatment is likely to be more effective, Richard says.

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