

Parkinson's targets 'straight arrows'?

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They tend not to smoke, drink, or seek thrills. They work hard. They show up on time, keep their homes neat, and follow complex medical instructions to the letter.

Doctors have noticed for decades that their Parkinson's disease patients often seem to share certain personality traits.

Now, a growing body of research suggests the disease, which afflicts more than a half-million Americans and has no cure, really does tend to strike

"straight arrows."

The apparent link between Parkinson's and a certain personality raises the question of whether the disease begins years or even decades before the onset of symptoms such as tremors, slowness of movement, and rigidity.

That possibility, a topic under discussion at last week's World Parkinson Congress in Washington, has gained currency, raising the prospect that if the disease can be detected earlier, perhaps someday it can be prevented.

If there's a Parkinson's type,

it also implies that people with a shortfall of the brain chemical dopamine early in life may have certain personality characteristics, such as risk aversion. Those same people, as they age, may develop Parkinson's.

So, complex traits that seem like integral parts of a person's identity actually might stem from the early effects of their disease.

"To my mind, this is the best example of a personality trait that has been associated with changes in a specific brain chemical," said Dr. Matthew

Menza, a leading specialist on Parkinson's and personality.

Though no one has followed people for decades to see whether those with a "Parkinson's personality" are more likely to develop Parkinson's, Menza says the "weight of the evidence" supports the idea of a link.

His list of traits associated with the disease include industriousness, punctuality, orderliness, inflexibility, cautiousness, and lack of novelty-seeking. Other doctors mention drive, ambition, altruism, cleanliness, and obsession with details.