

# A straight arrow toward disease?

## Personality traits early in life might suggest Parkinson's

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BOSTON — 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.

A growing body of research, including surveys of Parkinson's patients and laboratory studies in mice, suggests that the disease, which afflicts more than a half million Americans and has no cure, tends 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. This 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 is 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. These same people, as they age, may develop Parkinson's. So complex traits that seem like integral parts of a person's identity might actually 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 Matthew Menza, a leading specialist on Parkinson's and personality. It is also, he said, "the classic case of 'when bad things happen to good people.'"

Although no one has followed people for decades to see whether those with a "Parkinson's personality" are more likely to develop Parkinson's, Menza said 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 a lack of novelty-seeking. Other doctors mention drive, ambition, altruism, cleanliness and a tendency toward obsession with details.

Famous people with Parkinson's include former U.S. attorney general Janet Reno and actor Michael J. Fox, who spoke to more than 2,000 doctors, researchers and patients at the conference.