



Heather MacTavish, left, with Parkinson's disease patient Margaret Moylan, 61, right, and volunteers Jocelyn Thomas, second right, and Charlie Kisch, leads a dance exercise at the World Parkinson's Conference on Feb. 23 in Washington, D.C.

## HEALTHBEAT: EXERCISE MAY SLOW PARKINSON'S

Growing evidence suggests that exercise — whether it's sweating on a treadmill or on a dance floor — can help Parkinson's patients move better and might even slow the inevitable march of the degenerative brain disease.

"Even if we can't reverse things, I think we still hope that we can slow down or even stop the progression," said Michael Zigmond, a neurobiologist at the University of Pittsburgh, who, with colleagues, has come up with some of the most tantalizing research.

If nothing else, "we have to keep our bodies in shape for the next therapy" to be discovered, adds Dr. David Heydrick, a Maryland neurologist who also has Parkinson's and puts in an hour on the treadmill daily.

The notion is gaining such

ground that when the National Institutes of Health organized an international meeting of Parkinson's researchers last month, patients, dance instructors and personal trainers were invited to tell the benefits they believe come from physical activity of all kinds.

Heather MacTavish will sometimes dance for hours at a stretch, activity she credits with allowing her to cut in half the daily medication she had needed when she was first diagnosed a decade ago.

"If I had music, I didn't have to tell my left leg to move, my entire body starts moving," explains MacTavish, 57, of Tiburon, Calif. "As the small motor movements get more difficult, the larger, more expansive movements of dance take over."

Parkinson's gradually de-

stroys brain cells called neurons that produce dopamine, a chemical crucial for the cellular signaling that controls muscle movement. As dopamine levels drop, symptoms increase: tremors in the arms, legs and face; periodically stiff or frozen limbs; slow movement; impaired balance and coordination.

What kinds of exercise? Consult a physical therapist knowledgeable about Parkinson's to tailor the moves, Heydrick advises. Treadmills, weight-bearing exercises and balance techniques, such as walking backward, may be useful.

Zigmond thinks even more advanced patients might benefit, saying researchers need to develop useful exercises that can be done from a chair.

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