

Parkinson's patients test gum to help swallowing

Researchers in London, Ont., get \$31,500 grant to expand pilot project

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People with swallowing problems are often encouraged to eat foods that are easy to swallow, such as soup. (Larry Crowe/Associated Press)

A pilot project in southwestern Ontario is trying to determine if chewing gum will ease swallowing problems among people with Parkinson's disease.

Parkinson's is a neurodegenerative disease that affects more than 100,000 Canadians, and can cause swallowing difficulty as the disease progresses, according to the Parkinson Society Canada.

That's because Parkinson's symptoms such as tremor, stiffness and slow movements can also occur in the muscles used in speaking and swallowing.

Early research suggests repeated chewing improves swallowing and secretion among Parkinson's patients who chew gum several hours a day.

Now the team is investigating how long the benefits last.

Chewing gum has "already had a huge impact within our clinic," said speech language pathologist Angie South of London Health Sciences Centre.

"We're having clients coming back saying they're swallowing better with meals," South added in a release.

South, fellow speech language pathologist Stephanie Somers and neurologist Dr. Mandar Job are conducting a year-long pilot project to learn more about how chewing gum may help improve the quality of life of people with Parkinson's.

This week, the team received a \$31,500 grant from Parkinson Society Canada to extend their study from 20 patients to 40.

Participants will chew gum on their own time at home, for at least three hours a day, the London Free Press reported.

The society also awarded grants for studies looking at:

- The difference between the neurological, cognitive, functional and biomechanical problems caused by Parkinson's disease, and how patients perceive those deficits.
- The structure of a mutated protein, called parkin, that is involved in a form of juvenile Parkinson's.