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HEALTH

Playing Ping-Pong Through Parkinson's

The game provides fitness, camaraderie and hope for people with the disease



Nenad Bach, far right, founded PingPongParkinson and enjoys playing with members of all ages. In addition to play, the group does stretches, low-impact exercises, juggling exercises and facial movement techniques.

JACKIE MOLLOY

By Barbara Brody AARP

Croatian American musician Nenad Bach was diagnosed with [Parkinson's disease](#) in 2010 at age 55, and five years later, his tremors were bad enough that he had to quit playing guitar. Unlike many patients who continue to degenerate, Bach is now thriving. In his late 60s, he's not only playing guitar — he's in the midst of an international tour. He attributes his enhanced health to a familiar racket sport.



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Mike Berte has had Parkinson's for about 12 years and has enjoyed incorporating ping-pong into his active lifestyle. The club meets every Wednesday and plays for about 45 minutes.

JACKIE MOLLOY

Bach, who spends much of his time in the New York City suburb of Croton-on-Hudson, fell into ping-pong when a friend invited him for a casual game at a table tennis club. He noticed that he felt much better the next day, so he returned the following week. Again, he noticed an improvement in his symptoms. He stuck with it, and about six months later, he was able to play his guitar to a syncopated beat, which requires significant finger dexterity.



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Eager to share his passion for ping-pong and his renewed sense of health with other Parkinson's disease patients, Bach started spreading the word. His group evolved into [PingPongParkinson](#), a nonprofit organization and group of ping-pong enthusiasts. About 30 regulars typically join Bach once a week at Westchester Table Tennis Center in Pleasantville, New York, and other chapters have sprung up in New Jersey, Philadelphia, Wisconsin and California, as well as in Europe. The group holds informal dinners every few months, as well as an annual championship. The 2023 World Championship will be held in Austria in September.

The transformative power of ping-pong

Bach says he is not the only one in the group who has reaped an enormous benefit from ping-pong. "We have people who couldn't walk who are walking now. We have ones who couldn't talk but are talking now," he says.

Parkinson's disease typically strikes later in life, so it makes sense that most members in Bach's group are 60 or older. But patients of all ages and stages are welcome, and they all have something to contribute and take away from the group.

Mike Berte is 56, and he's been living with Parkinson's for 12 years. He drives about an hour each way from his home in Trumbull, Connecticut, to play ping-pong with Bach and the rest of the group once a week.

Berte says his condition is relatively mild, noting that he still plays golf and that he recently started playing ping-pong with a group of people who don't have Parkinson's. Outside the PingPongParkinson group, he doesn't know many who share his condition. "My family is very supportive, but it's cathartic when you talk to someone who's going through what you're going through," he says.

Matt Perks, 49, is the youngest member of the group and one of its newest members. A resident of Beacon, New York, he, too, travels about an hour each way to play with the group in Pleasantville. The fact that there's an age gap between him and the majority of the group members isn't bothersome. "There's a common bond. You get put into groups with people who are 55, 65, 75 – and it's fun."

Perks has little doubt that his participation is helping him physically as well as mentally.

“Every time I go down there, my right side is incredibly stiff and jerky, and within about 20 minutes [of playing], it just falls away,” he says. “Within 15-20 minutes, I start playing in a much looser, faster way, which is a joy.”



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Parkinson’s research opportunity

A few small studies have confirmed that ping-pong may indeed curtail the progression of Parkinson’s or possibly even reverse symptoms, but Bach wants more proof and specifics. “It works ... [but] I’d love to know why it works,” he says. He recently gave a presentation in Germany for a group of physicians and scientists; he hopes some will be interested enough to conduct a large-scale clinical trial on the subject.

Though Bach is primarily interested in understanding the physiological benefits of ping-pong, he notes that the sport also provides social engagement and fosters optimism that people with Parkinson’s often lack. [Depression](#) is common among people with the condition, and patients have an increased risk of suicide, according to a 2020 Danish [study](#) published in JAMA. Frustration regarding physical deterioration may be a driving factor, but isolation and embarrassment are also common, Bach says.

“People are embarrassed by the shaking,” he says. “You go to a restaurant, and the salad is shaking all over. Many people sit at home and wait to die.” Ping-pong, he says, may serve as an antidote to feelings of despair.

The weekly PingPongParkinson meetups feature casual matches, plus a few [stretches](#) and exercises designed to [improve balance and flexibility](#). They conclude with some boxing and

juggling moves. “And we always end with a song,” Bach says. People leave the session “smiling from ear to ear,” he says.

Many group members have forged [friendships](#), and some have even become couples, says Bach, who describes it as “a close group that’s not an official support group.”

Video: Mom-Daughter Duo Hike 2,200 Miles to Fight Parkinson’s

Barbara Brody is a New York-based freelance writer who specializes in health and wellness. Her work has appeared in many outlets, including WebMD, Health and Prevention.

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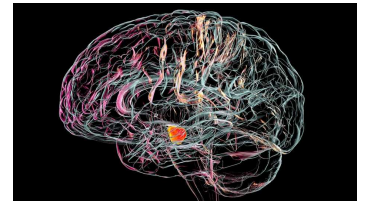
One man living with the disorder offers advice on how to address the disparities



CONDITIONS & TREATMENTS

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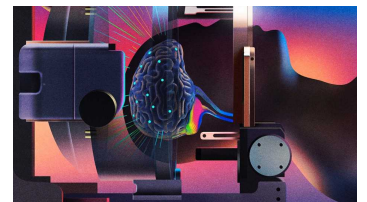
Researchers say it's able to identify the disease before onset of symptoms



CONDITIONS & TREATMENT

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