

PARKINSON'S DISEASE AND OCCUPATIONAL EXPOSURE: A CASE-CONTROL STUDY CONDUCTED IN SOUSSE (TUNISIA)

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ABSTRACT

To study the relationship between exposure to the risk factors highlighted in the literature and Parkinson's disease. This is a case-control study. The cases were patients with Parkinson's disease and who were treated at the Neurology Department of the Sahloul Teaching Hospital of Sousse (Tunisia). The controls were matched and recruited among the patients of the hospital and were free from neurological pathologies. We recruited 92 cases of Parkinson's disease during the study period. The mean age was 65.16 ± 10.98 years for the study group and 65.02 ± 11.09 years for the control group. The factors independently associated with risk of Parkinson's disease at the end of the multivariate analysis were: the construction and public works sector ($p = 0.004$; OR_a = 8.15; IC95% [4.13-146.1]), occupational exposure to pesticides ($p = 10^{-3}$, OR = 19.6 [4.23-90.70]), personal history of head trauma ($p = 0.04$, OR = 7.98 [1.09-58.22]), well water consumption ($p = 0.05$, OR = 7.28 [1.81-29, 19] and stress ($p = 10^{-3}$, OR = 19.87 [3.48-71.97]). The etiology of Parkinson's disease is complex and involves genetic and environmental factors. Studying these risk factors will further understanding of the underlying mechanisms of the disease.

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1. Introduction

Parkinson's disease (PD) represents the most common neurodegenerative disease after Alzheimer's disease [1, 2]. This pathology affects about 10 million people around the world [3], with a rate from 1% to 3% among people over 60 years [4, 5]. The motor and non-motor features of PD lead to functional difficulties which affect daily life and can increase mortality and morbidity related to this disease. In fact, individuals suffering from PD require social and medical care resulting in a potentially large economic burden for them, their families, and their care partners [6].

There are multiple genetic and environmental factors implicated in the development of PD and the complicated interaction between these factors could contribute to its diversity [7].

The classic clinical picture associates, to varying degrees, a rest tremor, muscle rigidity also called plastic, a slowness or loss of movement and postural instability [8].

These symptoms are caused by a progressive loss of dopaminergic neurons that are located in a specific zone of the brain called the substantia nigra or the black substance [9, 10]. Its etiopathogenesis probably complex and multi-factorial involving numerous genetic, environmental and infectious or toxic factors [6, 11, 12]. The discovery of a link between the pesticide 1-Methyl-4-phenyl-1,2,3,6-tetrahydropyridine (MPTP) and the appearance of symptoms of PD in humans has allowed for the implication of certain environmental agents in the genesis of this disease [12].

Subsequently, multiple studies have been conducted in order to evaluate the association between pesticides and PD [12, 13]. Occupational exposure to other substances such as heavy metals, solvents and magnetic fields has also been associated with an increased risk of PD [14]. An increased risk of PD has even been reported in certain occupational groups [15, 16]. However, results regarding the association between these factors and the occurrence of PD remain far from conclusive.

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The aim of this study was to identify potential occupational factors associated with PD in the Tunisian population.

2. Material and methods

This case-control study was carried out in the department of neurology at the Sahloul Teaching Hospital and in the Department of Occupational Medicine in Farhat Hached Teaching Hospital over a period of six months from December 1st 2018 to May 31st 2019.

The cases were made up of patients with PD being treated in the outpatient clinics and/or in the Department of Neurology of the Sahloul Teaching Hospital during the study period. The inclusion criteria were patients diagnosed with PD according to criteria defined by the "Movement Disorder Society" (MDS 2015) and who had been employed for at least one year, before or at the time of onset of the first clinical symptoms. Patients diagnosed with PD who had worked for a period of less than one year and individuals who did not consent to be part of the study were excluded.

The control group consisted of patients who were not suffering from PD or any other neurological condition and who had worked for at least one year and were randomly recruited during the same period among consultants in the Department of Occupational Medicine in Farhat Hached Teaching Hospital, Sousse. Participants who had a family history of PD or any other neurological disease and who did not consent to participate in the study were excluded. The two groups had the same number of participants and were matched for age and gender.

Data were collected by the same investigator from medical records and direct interviews with patients who attended the outpatient neurology clinics.

Data included socio-demographic characteristics, medical history and family history, lifestyle habits and nutritional habits. The frequency of consumption of fibre (fruits and vegetables) and of red meat and fat were considered low if the weekly consumption was ≤ 1 , medium if the consumption was between 2 and 3 and frequent if it was above 4 times a week. Coffee consumption was considered zero if the daily consumption was zero and frequent if the daily consumption was ≥ 3 [17]. Physical activity was classified into 3 categories: absent, light, and intense. Stress was assessed using a question of two levels « Do you consider your job to be stressful? » [18].

Socioeconomic level was assessed on the basis of the monthly salary of the participants, low if the salary was below 320 dinars/month, medium if the salary was between 320 and 1000 dinars/month and high if it was superior to 1000 dinars/month [18].

A semi quantitative estimate (self-reported) of the exposure to occupational factors implicated in the occurrence of PD according to literature was made taking into account the frequency if the daily exposure (H), the duration of the exposure in term of years (D) and the level of exposure (N).

The level of exposure was ranked from 0 to 3; it was classified as 0 if the exposure was normal, 1 if the exposure was mild, 2 if the exposure was moderate with direct contact with the product and 3 if there was a close handling of the product. An exposure index (I) was calculated for each product to evaluate the approximate intensity of exposure.

This index (I) was calculated according to the following formula: $I = H \times D \times N$ [13]. The list of products investigated included pesticides, organic solvents, detergents, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH) metal dusts, cement dust, textile dust, ionizing radiations and magnetic fields.

Medical data was organized according to the age at onset of symptoms of PD, and thus into 4 categories: juvenile (<20 years), early onset (between 20 and 40 years), the common form (between 41 years and 70 years), and late onset (>70 years). Other parameters were considered, such as the duration of the disease, the received medications, evolution under treatment and professional impact. The clinical form was characterized according to the predominant symptom: the tremulous form, akine to-rigid, akinetic and mixed form.

Data was input and analyzed using SPSS 20.0 software. For the comparison of means, Student's t test was used if the variable followed a normal distribution; otherwise, the Mann-Whitney U test was used. Comparison of frequencies was done using the Pearson Chi-Square test. Regarding the multivariate analysis, a multiple binary logistic regression was performed. For all the statistical tests, the level of significance was set at $p \leq 0.05$.

3. Results

In total, 92 patients with PD and 92 controls were recruited during the period of the study. The mean age was 65.11 ± 10.9 years for the cases, versus 65.0 ± 11.1 years for the controls without any statistically significant difference ($p=0.93$). The sex ratio was 1.42 for both groups.

The risk of developing of PD was higher in subjects who did not have any children ($p=0.04$, OR IC95%= 3.61[0.96-13.6]), who were illiterate ($p<10^{-3}$, OR=4.68 ; IC 95% [2.08-10.56]), those who had a low socio-economic level ($p<10^{-3}$, OR IC 95%=33.95[4.48-256]), those who were living in an Arabic-style house $p=0.001$; OR IC 95%= 2.78 [1.53-5.06] and those who had a medical history of head trauma ($p=0.001$; OR= 6.70 IC95% [1.89-23.83]) (Table 1).

The risk was also increased by low consumption of fruits and vegetables ($p<10^{-3}$; OR=18.69 IC95% [4.29-81.40]), the consumption of well water ($p<10^{-3}$; OR= 5.27 IC95% [2.42-11.48]), stress ($p<10^{-3}$; OR= 6.80 IC95% [3.56-12.97]) and chronic alcohol consumption ($p=0.02$; OR IC95% =3.01 [1.12-8.10]). Smoking was more frequent in controls than cases ($p=0.001$; OR=0.27 IC95% [0.12-0.62]).

Variables	Cases		Controls		P	OR (IC 95%)
	N	%	N	%		
1/ Marital status						
Single	5	5.4	3	3.3	0.71	1.7 [0.39-7.35]
Married	79	85.9	79	85.9	1	1 ; [0.43-2.29]
Divorced	1	1.1	4	4.3	0.36	0.24 ; [0.02-2.2]
Widowed	7	7.6	6	6.5	0.77	1.18 ; [0.38-3.65]
2/Level of education						
Illiterate	31	33.7	9	9.8	10^{-3}	4.68 [2.08-10.56]
Primary school	38	41.3	30	32.6	0.22	1.45 [0.79-2.65]
Secondary school	20	21.7	35	38	0.016	0.45 [0.23-0.86]
University	3	3.3	18	19.6	0.001	0.13 [0.03-0.48]
3/Number of children						
Without children	10	10.9	3	3.3	0.04	3.61 [0.96-13.6]
1	2	2.2	2	2.2	1	1 [0.13-7.25]
2	5	5.4	10	10.9	0.17	0.47 [0.15-1.43]
3	21	22.8	41	44.6	0.002	0.36 [0.19-0.69]
≥ 4	54	58.7	36	39.1	0.08	2.21 [1.22-3.98]
4/Socio economic level						
Low	25	27.2	1	1.1	$<10^{-3}$	33.95 [4.48-256]
Medium	61	66.3	70	76.1	0.14	0.61 [0.32-1.17]
High	6	6.5	20	21.7	0.003	0.25 [0.09-0.65]
5/Housing						
Villa	24	26.1	41	44.6	0.009	0.43 [0.23-0.81]
Arabic house	60	65.2	37	40.2	0.001	2.78 [1.53-5.06]
Appartment	8	8.7	14	15.2	0.17	0.53 [0.21-1.33]
6/Medical history						
Diabetes	6	6.5	13	14.1	0.09	0.42 [0.15-1.16]
HTA	23	25.0	34	37.0	0.07	0.56 [0.30-1.07]
Head trauma	17	18.5	3	3.3	0.001	6.7 [1.89-23.83]
Psychiatric history	7	7.6	3	3.3	0.19	2.44 [0.61-9.75]

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of Parkinson disease cases and controls in Tunisia.

A statistically significant decrease of the risk of PD has been associated with regular physical activity (OR=0.29 IC95% [0.15-0.54], $p < 10^{-3}$); average daily coffee consumption (OR IC95%= 0.39[0.21-0.72]; $p = 0.003$), average consumption of fruits and vegetables (OR=0.45 IC95% [0.24-0.81]) and of fat (OR= 0.49 IC95% [0.27-0.88], $p = 0.018$). The long-term consumption of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs NSAIDs seems to be a protective factor for PD (OR= 0.22 ; IC 95% [0.06-0.082] and $p = 0.01$).

The different sectors to which our participants were assigned during their professional activity are illustrated in table 2.

The majority of cases had worked in the agriculture sector (40.2%) while the majority of controls worked in the health sector (25%). The risk of developing PD was significantly higher in the agriculture sector ($p < 10^{-3}$; OR=8.16 IC95% [3.40-19.61]), electronics industry sector ($p = 0.01$) and construction and public works sector ($p = 0.005$, OR=5.32 IC 95% [1.47 – 19.21]). Farmers and masons had a significantly higher risk of PD ($p < 10^{-3}$; OR= 9.21 IC95% [3.64-23.29] et $p = 0.01$; OR= 6.11 IC95% [1.31-28.39] respectively). A significant risk of developing PD was noted in individuals who had more than one job ($p < 10^{-3}$; OR= 9.13 IC95% [3.04-27.39]).

Activity sector	Cases		Controls		p-value	OR (IC95%)
	N	%	N	%		
1/Agriculture	37	40.2	7	7.6	10^{-3}	8.16 [3.40-19.61]
2/Education	3	3.3	13	14.1	0.009	0.2 [0.05-0.74]
3/Health	3	3.3	23	25	10^{-3}	0.10 [0.02-0.35]
4/Transport	3	3.3	3	3.3	1	1
5/Communication	0	0	2	2.2	0.15	-
6/Métallurgie	3	3.3	0	0	0.08	-
7/Electronics industry	6	6.5	0	0	0.01	-
8/Buildings and public works	14	15.2	3	3.3	0.005	5.32 [1.47-19.21]
9/Textile	6	6.5	12	13	0.13	0.46 [0.16-1.29]
10/Automotive industry	2	2.2	0	0	0.15	-
11/Administration	6	6.5	19	20.7	0.005	0.26 [0.10-0.70]
12/Carpentry	0	0	2	2.2	0.15	-

Table 2. The distribution of cases and controls according to the sector of activity

In terms of occupational exposure to the implicated products as detailed above, factors significantly associated with PD were exposure to pesticides ($p < 10^{-3}$ et OR= 14.6 IC95% [5.42-9.34]), exposure to organic solvents ($p = 0.003$ et OR= 3.98 IC95% [1.51-10.44]), exposure to metal dusts of iron ($p = 0.001$ et OR= 9.47 IC95% [2.11-42.51]) and exposure to cement $p = 0.005$ et OR=3.73 IC95% [1.41-9.83]) (Table 3).

Exposition professionnelle	Cases	Controls	P	OR IC95%	
Pesticides	n (%)	42 (55.7)	5 (5.4)	10^{-3}	14.6 [5.42-9.34]
	EI : M ± SD	235.34±355.39	9.26±45.65	10^{-3}	
Organic solvents	n (%)	20 (21.7)	6 (6.5)	0.003	3.98 [1.51-10.44]
	EI: M ± SD	110.87±250.30	30.24±146.72	0.008	
Detergents	n (%)	18 (19.6)	14 (15.2)	0.43	1.35[0.62-2.91]
	EI: M ± SD	56.92±161.8	41.52±120.53	0.46	
Lead	n (%)	7 (7.6)	2 (2.2)	0.08	3.70[0.74-8.34]
	EI : M ± SD	37.17±156.67	3.59±31.39	0.045	
Copper	n (%)	7 (7.6)	0	0.02	-
	EI : M ± SD	27.74±105.71	0	0.013	-
Iron	n (%)	16 (17.4)	2 (2.2)	0.001	9.47(2.11-42.51)
	EI : M ± SD	80.08±213.63	14.46±97.64	0.008	
Mercury	n (%)	1 (1.1)	0	0.31	-
	EI : M ± SD	1.13±10.83	0	0.31	-
Cement	n (%)	19 (20.7)	6 (6.5)	0.005	3.73 [1.41-9.83]
	EI : M ± SD	89.38±218.95	26.09±115.21	0.015	
Magnetic fields	n (%)	2 (2.2)	0	0.15	-
	EI: M ± SD	6.78±45.8	0	0.15	-

Table 3. The frequency and intensity of occupational exposures of cases and controls (M ± SD : Mean ± Standard deviation ; IE : Exposure index)

After the multivariate analysis, the factors independently associated with PD were the construction and public works sector ($p = 0.004$; ORa= 8.15; IC95% [4.13-146.1]), exposure to pesticides ($p = 10^{-3}$, ORa = 19.6 [4.23-90.70]), a personal history of head trauma ($p = 0.04$, ORa = 7.98 [1.09-58.22]), well water consumption ($p = 0.05$, OR = 7.28 [1.81-29, 19] and stress ($p = 10^{-3}$, ORa = 19.87 [3.48-71.97]) (Table 4).

	Cases N (%)	Controls N (%)	p-value	ORb IC 95%	p-value	ORa IC 95%
Stress	66(71.7)	25(27.2)	10^{-3}	6.8 [3.56-12.97]	10^{-3}	19.87 [3.48-71.97]
Well water consumption	36 (39.1)	10 (10.9)	10^{-3}	5.27 [2.42-11.48]	0.05	7.28 [1.81-29.19]
Building and public works sector	14 (15.2)	3 (3.3)	0.005	5.32 [1.47-19.21]	0.004	8.15 [4.13-146.1]
Exposure to pesticides	42 (45.7)	5 (5.4)	10^{-3}	14.61 [5.42-39.34]	10^{-3}	19.6 [4.23-90.7]
Medical history of head trauma	17 (18.5)	3 (3.3)	0.001	6.72 [1.89-23.83]	0.04	7.98 [1.09-58.22]

Table 4. Factors independently associated with the risk of developing PD after binary logistic regression

4. Discussion

This study has highlighted the role of certain risk factors related to lifestyle and occupational exposures in the genesis of PD. These risk factors are: a medical history of head trauma, stress, the consumption of well-water and occupational exposure to pesticides.

As this is a rare disease, as is the case for most neurodegenerative pathologies, the use of the case-control approach made it possible to study many risk factors at the same time [19, 20] and to assess occupational exposures for the cases and controls in the same way, particularly taking into consideration previous exposures at the expense of a risk of a recall bias. For all the cases included, the diagnosis was made by experts from an academic center which results in a low risk of selection bias at the expense of a relatively limited size of the sample.

In this study, rural life was associated -in univariate analysis- with an increased risk of PD ($p = 10^{-3}$; OR= 4.52 IC95% [2.39 – 8.5]). Similar results were found in a French ecological study showing a higher incidence of PD in rural areas and in areas with agricultural activity [21]. According to some studies, pesticides used in agriculture could contaminate the environment (soil, air, well water) and consequently become a source of exposure to inhabitants who live near the agricultural areas of even within a certain distance [22]. These findings could explain, therefore, the association between well water consumption and PD, as groundwater may become contaminated by pesticides, especially in rural areas. In this context, Jane and al [23] have investigated the link between PD and underground pesticide levels and concluded that for each 0.01 mg/l of pesticides in ground water, the risk of PD would increase by 3% (OR=1.03 IC 95% [1.02-1.04]).

The risk would be also increase among males, since PD has a male predominance as shown by the sex ratio of 1.42 in our study and of 1.37 to 3.7 in the majority if epidemiological studies [6, 24, 25]. These data could be explained by the role of sexual dimorphism in the development of the nigrostriatal pathway and the presence of genes related to chromosome Y, in particular the gene SRY, which can have an influence on the occurrence of PD [26].

In a meta-analysis carried out by Bellou et al [27], a significant association was noted between other neuro-psychiatric disorders (anxiety, depression) and the risk of PD. This could also be the case for neurological traumatic damage since subjects who had a medical history of head trauma had a higher risk of PD ($p = 0.04$, $OR = 7.98$ [1.09-58.22]). Similar findings were reported by Gao and Hong [28] who identified an increased incidence of abnormal parkinsonian movements in boxers.

Regarding the role of stress in the development of PD, in a large prospective cohort study, authors have reported positive associations between stress indicators and the risk of PD [29] which is consistent with our results where stress was independently associated with PD ($p = 10^{-3}$, $OR = 19.87$ [3.48-71.97]). This could be explained by the fact that chronic stress can trigger an alteration and a degeneration of dopaminergic neurons, accompanied by an increase in abnormal alpha synuclein inclusions and an activation of a pro-inflammatory response [30] as well as an increase in catecholamines (including dopamine) and glucocorticoids that are responsible for auto-oxidation which could induce the neuro-degeneration [31].

However, certain factors related to lifestyle maybe associated with a decreased risk of PD, such as the practice of physical activity on a regular basis ($OR=0.29$ IC95% [0.15-0.54], $p<10^{-3}$). According to a study conducted by Paul and al. [17] that measured physical activity by calculating the metabolic equivalent (MET/hours/weeks/year), intense physical activity is associated with the reduction of the risk of PD. Similarly, a study performed in 2016 in central California noted a negative association between the risk of PD and moderate or vigorous physical activity over the course of life as well as the participation in competitive sports at an early age [32].

As for the impact of nutrition on the occurrence of PD, in this study, reduced risk of PD was noted among coffee consumers which is consistent with the majority of studies in literature [33]. This neuroprotective effect could be explained by the fact that caffeine is an antagonist of A2a receptor of adenosine [34]. In addition, caffeine can change the composition of intestinal microbiota in order to alleviate intestinal inflammation which can reduce the folding of the alpha synuclein protein decreasing the risk of PD by minimizing the propagation of protein aggregates to the central nervous system [35]. Correlations between the consumption of fruit and vegetables and PD have been assessed in many studies with results suggesting a protective effect. In fact, in a cross-sectional study carried out by Mischeley and al [36] among 1053 individuals with self-declared idiopathic PD, authors have concluded that fresh fruits and vegetables were associated with statistically significantly lower rates of disease progression.

The analysis of the effect of occupational exposures on the development of PD has made it possible to suggest a role for many products, in particular, pesticides, solvents and metals [37, 38]. According to a meta-analysis including 104 studies, results have shown a significant association between pesticides, solvents and PD [39]. Several types of pesticides have been implicated, mainly organophosphates and organochlorines the principle being dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (or DDT). The latter, which has a half-life superior to 60 years, was widely used as an insecticide in developed countries until the 1960s and it is currently banned in most western countries. Nevertheless, it continues to be used in developing countries notably Tunisia [40].

The potential role of organic solvents in the etiopathogenesis of PD has been investigated since the 1980s [41, 42]. Since then, several epidemiological studies have aimed to highlight the link between PD and organic solvents, the most studied of which were trichloroethylene (TCE), toluene and methanol [43, 44].

5. Conclusions

The risk of developing PD is increased by factors related to lifestyle and the work environment. Improving methods of evaluating exposure risks could provide more data in order to develop a professional theory with which to identify the main risk factors for PD and implement effective preventive strategies.

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