

## Voice test could catch Parkinson's years earlier

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Actor Michael J Fox is a high profile sufferer of Parkinson's Disease. Now scientists believe they can diagnose the condition earlier

A voice test could diagnose patients with Parkinson's disease years earlier.

Scientists hope the technique will prove crucial for sufferers of the neurological disorder because drugs and treatments are much more effective if the disease is caught as soon as possible.

Parkinson's is normally only diagnosed once symptoms show - meaning it is already at an advanced stage and patients have lost a significant number of brain cells.

But researchers have discovered that by measuring tiny changes in patterns of speech, undetectable to the human ear, they can tell whether a seemingly healthy person is a sufferer.

A computer programme developed by scientists at Haifa University in Israel can identify a Parkinson's 'voice' and could be used for screening those who are at hereditary risk of the disease or as part of a national screening programme.

Speech is affected by the disorder because it causes a deterioration of muscles in the neck and mouth - giving some sufferers a husky voice.

But the change is only apparent to the human ear after the disease has been conventionally diagnosed through symptoms such as rigid muscles, tremors, slow movement, and loss of balance.

The new test needs only a couple of sentences-from patients.

Doctors believe they could use earlier diagnoses from the technique to prevent the loss of up to 60 per cent of nerve cells in the area of the brain that controls movement.

[The Haifa team's method - reported in the Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research - has already been taken up by doctors in countries around the world.](#)

There are 120,000 sufferers of Parkinson's disease in the UK and there are about 10,000 new cases diagnosed each year, with the over-50s more at risk.

Dr Kieran Breen of Parkinson's UK said last night: 'Trying to find ways to diagnose Parkinson's at an early stage is key to understanding how to develop better and more effective treatments.'