In collaboration with Live Well with Parkinson’s, the Jeff and Diane Ross Movement Disorders Clinic at the Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care, and the Assistive Technology Clinic, George Brown’s Food Innovation and Research Studio (FIRSt) has created tasty, simple, low-protein recipes to help people with Parkinson’s Disease (PD) improve their quality of life.

As a degenerative disease, Parkinson’s can’t yet be cured, but it can be carefully managed to improve the patient’s quality of life. One strategy is a protein redistribution diet: low protein during the day and high protein in the evening. Protein intake interferes with the effectiveness of a crucial Parkinson’s medications, Levodopa or L-dopa. By limiting protein during the daytime when people are active, L-dopa is more effective in improving mobility. But protein is a key part of a balanced diet, so high protein meals are reintroduced in the evening, when people tend to be more sedentary.

Founder of Live Well with Parkinson’s, Dr. Galit Kleiner-Fisman knows that eating the right foods can help people with PD live better, but she also recognized the challenge patients face every day. “It’s difficult for most people to know what foods they should eat in terms of what has low protein, how to prepare it in a simple manner and still have diversity in their diet and maintain good nutrition.”

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Principal Investigator Moira Cockburn guided Culinary Management Nutrition (CMN) students through the recipe development process. “To develop a recipe that is reproducible, simple, healthy and tasty (actually) requires a lot of creativity.”

Or, as CMN student Jean Niravong puts it, “I learned how to take risks and innovate.” She recalls, for example, solving a snack that wouldn’t hold its shape: replace all-purpose flour with tapioca flour to create a low-protein fruit-bar that still binds, rather than crumbling. For Niravong, the project was experiential learning put into practice. After perfecting their recipes, students conducted cooking demonstrations for Parkinson’s patients at FIRSt facilities. For CMN student Khadija Atcha, engaging with patients and seeing how their work could change lives was the most rewarding part of the project. “It was exciting, being able to meet Parkinson’s patients and their caregivers, and cook our recipes for them.”

The students’ innovation brings Kleiner-Fisman one step closer to achieving her clinic’s mandate of enhancing quality of life. “People with PD have been provided with simple, palatable recipes as part of a strategy to enhance living well with Parkinson’s.”

The project that created livewellwithparkinsons.com was supported and funded by the Jeff and Diane Ross Movement Disorders Clinic at the Baycrest Centre, The Assistive Technology Clinic, The Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care Academic Health Science Centres Alternative Funding Plan Innovation Fund, Ontario Centres of Excellence (OCE), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Council of Canada (NSERC) College and Community Innovation (CCI) program.