

What is Restless Legs Syndrome?

Restless legs syndrome (RLS) causes a powerful urge to move your legs. Your legs become uncomfortable when you are lying down or sitting. Some people describe it as a creeping, crawling, tingling, or burning sensation. Moving makes your legs feel better, but not for long. RLS can make it hard to fall asleep and stay asleep.

In most cases, there is no known cause for RLS. In other cases, RLS is caused by a disease or condition, such as anemia or pregnancy. Some medicines can also cause temporary RLS. Caffeine, tobacco, and alcohol may make symptoms worse.

Lifestyle changes, such as regular sleep habits, relaxation techniques, and moderate exercise during the day can help. If those don't work, medicines may reduce the symptoms of RLS.

Most people with RLS also have a condition called periodic limb movement disorder (PLMD). PLMD is a condition in which a person's legs twitch or jerk uncontrollably, usually during sleep. PLMD and RLS can also affect the arms.

Causes

Restless leg syndrome (RLS) occurs most often in middle-aged and older adults. Stress makes it worse. The cause is not known in most patients.

RLS may occur more often in patients with:

- Chronic kidney disease
- Diabetes
- Iron deficiency
- Parkinson's disease
- Peripheral neuropathy
- Pregnancy
- Use of certain medications such as caffeine, calcium channel blockers, lithium, or neuroleptics
- Withdrawal from sedatives

RLS is commonly passed down in families. This may be a factor when symptoms start at a younger age. The abnormal gene has not yet been identified.

Restless leg syndrome can result in a decreased quality of sleep (insomnia). This lack of sleep can lead to daytime sleepiness, anxiety or depression, and confusion or slowed thought processes.

Symptoms

RLS leads to sensations in the lower legs between the knee and ankle. The feeling makes you uncomfortable unless you move your legs. These sensations:

- Usually occur at night when you lie down, or sometimes during the day when you sit for long periods of time
- May be described as creeping, crawling, aching, pulling, searing, tingling, bubbling, or crawling
- May last for 1 hour or longer
- Sometimes also occur in the upper leg, feet, or arms

You will feel an irresistible urge to walk or move your legs, which almost always relieves the discomfort.

Most patients have rhythmic leg movements during sleep hours, called periodic limb movement disorder (PLMD).

All of these symptoms often disturb sleep. Symptoms can make it difficult to sit during air or car travel, or through classes or meetings.

Symptoms may be worse during stress or emotional upset.

Exams and Tests

There is no specific test for restless leg syndrome.

The health care provider will not usually find any problems, unless you also have peripheral nerve disease.

Tests will be done to rule out disorders with similar symptoms, including iron deficiency anemia.

Treatment

In general, there is no known cure for restless leg syndrome; however if the condition is directly due to anemia, iron supplementation can resolve the condition.

Treatment is aimed at reducing stress and helping the muscles relax. The following techniques may help:

- Gentle stretching exercises
- Massage
- Warm baths

Low doses of pramipexole (Mirapex) or ropinirole (Requip) can be very effective at controlling symptoms in some people.

An antiseizure agent, gabapentin enacarbil (Horizant), was approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 2011 for moderate-to-severe RLS. Common side effects included mild sleepiness and dizziness.

The drug rotigotine (Neupro) was withdrawn from the US in 2008 because of concerns about absorption of the medication from the skin patch. The issue has since been corrected and the drug was approved in April 2012 for treatment of moderate-to-severe RLS.

If your sleep is severely disrupted, your health care provider may prescribe medications such as Sinemet (an anti-Parkinson's medication), gabapentin and pregabalin, or tranquilizers such as clonazepam. However, these medications may cause daytime sleepiness.

Patients with iron deficiency should receive iron supplements.

Low doses of narcotics may sometimes relieve symptoms of restless leg syndrome.

Outlook (Prognosis)

Restless leg syndrome is not dangerous or life-threatening, and it is not a sign of a serious disorder. However, it can be uncomfortable and disrupt your sleep, which can affect your quality of life.

Possible Complications

Insomnia may occur.

When to Contact a Medical Professional

Call for an appointment with your health care provider if:

- You have symptoms of restless leg syndrome
- Your sleep is disrupted