

What is Sleep Paralysis?

A frightening form of paralysis that occurs when a person suddenly finds himself or herself unable to move for a few minutes, most often upon falling asleep or waking up. Sleep paralysis is due to an irregularity in passing between the stages of sleep and wakefulness.

The symptoms of sleep paralysis include sensations of noises, smells, levitation, paralysis, terror, and images of frightening intruders. Once considered very rare, up to half of all people are now believed to experience sleep paralysis sometime during their life. Sleep paralysis is not considered to be a sign of a serious condition, although it can be frightening.

Sleep paralysis strikes as a person is moving into or out of REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, the deepest part of sleep. During REM sleep the body is largely disconnected from the brain, effectively leaving the body paralyzed. Sleep paralysis is the result of premature (or persistent) mind-body disconnection as one is about to enter into (or exit from) REM sleep.

Sleep paralysis occurs most often after jet lag or periods of sleeplessness that interrupt the normal REM patterns, or after changes in sleep patterns. It affects both sexes equally and occurs at all ages but is most common in teenagers. Sleep paralysis can be familial and may be genetic (inherited) in some cases.

An attack of sleep paralysis is usually harmless and self-limited. It tends to be over in a minute or two as soon as the brain and body re-establish connections and the person is able to move again. However, the memory of the terrifying sensations felt during sleep paralysis can long endure.

Sleep paralysis, however, along with other symptoms such as excessive daytime sleepiness, sleep attacks, and hallucinations, may suggest an underlying sleep disorder. Consult a sleep specialist if you experience repetitive episodes of sleep paralysis especially if associated with excessive daytime sleepiness.