

RESTLESS LEGS SYNDROME

WHAT IS RLS?

If you suffer from unpleasant tingling and crawling sensations, particularly during the night, you may have Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS). These sensations occur while you are awake. Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS), also known as Willis-Ekbom Disease (WED) is a neurological movement disorder characterised by uncomfortable sensations in the legs or sometimes the arms, that results in the compelling urge to move the affected limbs. Individuals describe the sensations as pulling, drawing, crawling, wormy, boring, tingling, pins and needles, prickly, and painful. These sensations can occur when the person is at rest. This is usually when sitting, i.e. watching a movie, plane or car travel and sitting with friends. They may also occur when the person lies down for sleep.

People with RLS describe an irresistible urge to move the legs when the sensations occur. Usually, moving the legs, walking, rubbing or massaging the legs, or doing knee bends can bring relief, at least briefly. If the legs are not moved, they can twitch/ jerk involuntarily. Symptoms are usually worse in the evening and may make falling asleep very difficult, a condition called Sleep Onset Insomnia. If sufferers do manage to fall asleep, leg movements may lead to frequent awakenings, a sense of insomnia and as a result they have unrefreshing sleep. It is easy to see why RLS sufferers complain of irritability, anxiety, and depression.

WHO GETS RLS?

RLS occurs in both sexes, however, women are twice as prone to RLS than men. Symptoms can begin any time, but are usually more common and severe amongst older people with varying degrees of intensity. As many as 7 to 10% of the population may be affected, with approximately 2% of these being children. RLS does not present the same for all sufferers. What works for one may not work for another and the location of the symptoms can also vary amongst patients, being in the legs, feet, arms, hands or other body parts. Up to 80% of people with RLS can also have Periodic Limb Movement



Disorder (PLMD), which is a completely separate condition to RLS. People with PLMD do not usually have RLS. RLS occurs while the person is awake whilst PLMD occurs in sleep.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE RLS?

- You have a strong urge to move your legs when sensations of crawling or tingling occur.
- Your symptoms occur when you are at rest, such as sitting or lying down.
- Your symptoms decrease when you move or massage the affected limbs.
- Symptoms are worse in the evening or when trying to sleep.
- Symptoms are not attributed to another medical condition like, nocturnal leg cramps, arthritis, peripheral neuropathy.

HOW IS RLS DIAGNOSED?

There is no laboratory test that can diagnose RLS. When someone with RLS sees a doctor, there is usually nothing abnormal the doctor can see or detect on examination. To help make a diagnosis, the doctor should ask about all current and past medical problems, family history, and current medications. If RLS is suspected, a referral to a sleep specialist is advised.

WHAT CAUSES RLS?

The cause is generally unknown, however, certain factors may be associated:

- RLS may be hereditary. You are 30-50% more likely to develop RLS if your ancestors did too.
- RLS may occur during pregnancy, especially during the final trimester. The symptoms usually disappear after delivery.

- Low iron levels or anaemia may worsen symptoms. Low iron in the brain has been linked to RLS.
- Chronic diseases may lead to RLS, particularly kidney failure. Other diseases such as diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, Parkinson's disease or damage to the nerves of the arms, hands, legs, or feet (i.e. peripheral neuropathy) may also be associated with RLS.
- High caffeine (coffee), sugar, alcohol intake and smoking may make RLS worse.
- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is common in children and adults with RLS.

HOW IS RLS TREATED?

If a cause, such as anaemia or low iron, can be identified, treating this may resolve the RLS. In mild cases, some people find taking a hot bath, massaging the legs, applying a heat or ice pack, exercising, or eliminating caffeine help alleviate symptoms. In more severe cases, medications are prescribed to control symptoms. Unfortunately, no single drug is effective for everyone with RLS. A medication that is initially effective may lose efficacy with nightly use. It may be necessary to change your medication to keep symptoms under control.

THE MOST COMMONLY USED DRUGS

- Calcium channel blockers (such as Pregabalin and Gabapentin)
- Dopaminergic drugs (such as those used to treat Parkinson's disease)
- Opioids (such as codeine)
- Benzodiazepines (eg. Clonazepam, diazepam)

Although there is some potential for benzodiazepines and opioids to become habit forming, this usually does not occur with the small dosages given to most RLS patients. Dopaminergic drugs can, eventually, reduce in efficacy and even exacerbate the RLS symptoms.

DOES THE SEVERITY OF RLS CHANGE?

Symptoms usually worsen with age. The severity can vary throughout a person's life. Some individuals enjoy periods of respite when RLS does not cause any problems, however, the symptoms usually return.

TRIGGERS FOR RLS?

RLS may be aggravated by antidepressant medications. If you take antidepressants, you may need to consult with your doctor to find one that you can tolerate with RLS symptoms. Caffeine, sugar, alcohol, and smoking can worsen symptoms, especially when you suddenly start or stop using them. Stress and anxiety are also contributing

factors. Some antihistamines, cold/flu medications and cough syrups can also exacerbate RLS symptoms. Anti-nausea drugs, such as travel sickness medication, may increase symptoms. Whilst mild to moderate exercise may help with RLS, excessive exercise can trigger symptoms in some people.


ABOUT US


Sleep Disorders Australia (SDA) is a voluntary not-for-profit organisation that provides information and support to people affected by sleep disorders throughout Australia. SDA advocates the needs of people with sleep disorders by raising awareness of sleep disorders and their impact on our lives. We also offer support and education with regards to preventing and treating sleep disorders.


We would be delighted if you joined us. Membership is open to sufferers, family members, medical professionals, and the general public. You can join via our website or email our membership officer for more information.

If you would like to support us financially, you can donate via our website or send a cheque to our address.


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DISCLAIMER: Information in this fact sheet is general in nature. It is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Discuss with your doctor if you are concerned about your sleep or other medical conditions.

