



Narcolepsy

Overview

Narcolepsy (NAR-ko-lep-se) is a disorder that causes periods of extreme daytime sleepiness. The disorder also may cause muscle weakness. Some people who have the disorder fall asleep suddenly, even if they're in the middle of talking, eating, or another activity.

Signs and Symptoms

The four major signs and symptoms of narcolepsy are extreme daytime sleepiness, cataplexy (muscle weakness) while awake, and hallucinations and sleep paralysis during sleep. Symptoms can range from mild to severe. Less than one-third of people who have narcolepsy have all four symptoms.

1. Extreme Daytime Sleepiness

All people who have narcolepsy have extreme daytime sleepiness. They often complain of mental cloudiness or "fog", memory problems or problems focusing, lack of energy or extreme exhaustion, and depression. Some people who have narcolepsy have episodes in which they fall asleep suddenly. This is more likely to happen when they're not active—for example, while reading, watching TV, or sitting in a meeting. However, it can also occur in the middle of talking, eating, or another activity. It can be dangerous for people with narcolepsy to drive, operate heavy machinery, or perform other activities that require alertness.

2. Cataplexy

This condition causes loss of muscle tone while you're awake. Muscle weakness affects part or all of your body. Cataplexy may make your head nod or make it hard for you to speak. Muscle weakness also may make your knees weak or cause you to drop things you're holding. Some people lose all muscle control and fall. Strong emotions—such as anger, surprise, fear, or laughter—often trigger cataplexy. It usually lasts a few seconds or minutes.

3. Hallucinations

If you have narcolepsy, you may have vivid dreams while falling asleep, waking up, or dozing. These dreams can feel very real. You may feel like you can see, hear, smell, and taste things.

4. Sleep Paralysis

This condition prevents you from moving or speaking while falling asleep or waking up. However, you're fully conscious (aware) during this time. Sleep paralysis usually lasts just a few seconds or minutes, but it can be scary.

Other Symptoms

Many people who have narcolepsy don't sleep well at night. They may have trouble falling and staying asleep. Vivid, scary dreams may disturb sleep. Not sleeping well at night worsens daytime sleepiness.



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Causes

Hypocretin (hi-po-KREET-in), a chemical in the brain, helps promote wakefulness. Most people who have narcolepsy have low levels of this chemical. What causes these low levels isn't well understood.

People who have narcolepsy often fall into the rapid eye movement (REM) stage of sleep quickly and wake up directly from it. As a result, they may have vivid dreams while falling asleep and waking up.

Prognosis

Narcolepsy symptoms usually begin during the teen or young adult years. People who have narcolepsy may find it hard to function at school, work, home, and in social situations because of extreme tiredness.

Narcolepsy has no cure, but medicines, lifestyle changes, and other therapies can improve symptoms. Research is ongoing on the causes of narcolepsy and new ways to treat it.

Assessment

Because narcolepsy is rare, it can take as long as 10 to 15 years for it to be correctly recognized and diagnosed. Also, many narcolepsy symptoms are like symptoms of other illnesses, such as infections, depression, and sleep disorders.

Your doctor will diagnose narcolepsy based on your signs and symptoms, your medical and family histories, a physical exam, and test results. A sleep study may also be recommended.