



Restless Legs Syndrome

Overview

Restless legs syndrome (RLS) is a disorder that causes a strong urge to move your legs. This urge to move often occurs with strange and unpleasant feelings in your legs. It can happen at any time, but is usually worse in the evening and at night.

People who have RLS describe the unpleasant feelings as creeping, crawling, pulling, itching, tingling, burning, aching, or electric shocks. Moving your legs relieves the urge and the unpleasant feelings. Sometimes, these feelings also occur in the arms.

RLS affects about 5–15 percent of Americans. Many people who have RLS have family members with the disorder.

RLS can make it hard to fall asleep and stay asleep. There are two types of RLS: one that starts early in life and tends to run in families, and the other usually starts abruptly later in life and does not run in families. Some diseases, conditions, and medicines may trigger RLS. For example, the disorder has been linked to kidney failure, Parkinson's disease, diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, pregnancy, and iron deficiency. When a disease, condition, or medicine causes RLS, the symptoms usually start suddenly.

Outlook

For some people, their RLS symptoms get worse over time. However, sometimes symptoms go away for weeks to months.

If a medical condition or medicine triggers RLS, the disorder may go away if the trigger is relieved or stopped. For example, RLS that occurs due to pregnancy tends to go away after giving birth. Treatments for RLS include lifestyle changes and medicines. Some simple lifestyle changes often help relieve mild cases of RLS. Medicines often can relieve or prevent the symptoms of more severe RLS.

What Are the Signs and Symptoms of Restless Legs Syndrome?

The four key signs of RLS are:

- A strong urge to move your legs. This urge often, but not always, occurs with unpleasant feelings in your legs. When the disorder is severe, you also may have the urge to move your arms.
- Symptoms that start or get worse when you're inactive. The urge to move increases when you're sitting still or lying down and resting.
- Relief from moving. Movement, especially walking, helps relieve the unpleasant feelings.
- Symptoms that start or get worse in the evening or at night.

You must have all four of these signs to be diagnosed with RLS.

The Urge to Move

RLS gets its name from the urge to move the legs when sitting or lying down. This movement relieves the unpleasant feelings that RLS sometimes causes. Typical movements are:

- Pacing and walking
- Jiggling the legs
- Stretching and flexing
- Tossing and turning
- Rubbing the legs



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Unpleasant Feelings

People who have RLS describe the unpleasant feelings in their limbs as creeping, crawling, pulling, itching, tingling, burning, aching, or electric shocks. Severe RLS may cause painful feelings. However, the pain usually is more of an ache than a sharp, stabbing pain.

The unpleasant feelings from RLS often occur in the lower legs (calves). But the feelings can occur at any place in the legs or feet. They also can occur in the arms.

The feelings seem to come from deep within the limbs, rather than from the surface. You usually will have the feelings in both legs. However, the feelings can occur in one leg, move from one leg to the other, or affect one leg more than the other.

People who have mild symptoms may notice them only when they're still or awake for a long time, such as on a long airplane trip or while watching TV. If they fall asleep quickly, they may not have symptoms when lying down at night.

The unpleasant feelings from RLS aren't the same as the leg cramps many people get at night. Leg cramps often are limited to certain muscle groups in the leg, which you can feel tightening. Leg cramps cause more severe pain and require stretching the affected muscle for relief.

Sometimes arthritis or peripheral artery disease (P.A.D.) can cause pain or discomfort in the legs. Moving the limbs usually worsens the discomfort instead of relieving it.

Periodic Limb Movement in Sleep

Many people who have RLS also have a condition called periodic limb movement in sleep (PLMS). PLMS causes your legs or arms to twitch or jerk about every 10 to 60 seconds during sleep. Unlike RLS, these movements only happen when sleeping. These movements cause you to wake up often and get less sleep. The person may not be aware of the movements and is confused when they are exhausted after having what seemed like a full night's sleep.

Most people with RLS also have PLMD. But it is important to note that many people have PLMD without RLS. Only a sleep specialist can make an accurate diagnosis.