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The National Women's Health Information Center

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Frequently Asked Questions about Restless Legs Syndrome

What is restless legs syndrome (RLS)?

Restless legs syndrome (RLS) is a *sleep disorder* in which a person has unpleasant feelings or sensations in the legs. These feelings are described as creeping, crawling, tingling, pulling, or painful. While these sensations happen most often in the calf or lower leg area, they can be felt anywhere from the ankle to the upper thigh. RLS symptoms can occur in one or both legs and can also be felt in the arms. These symptoms occur most often when lying down, but can also occur when sitting for long periods of time, such as at a desk, riding in a car, or watching a movie. People with RLS talk about having an irresistible urge to move the legs. Moving the legs, walking, rubbing or massaging the legs, or doing knee bends can bring relief, at least for a short time.

Unlike other conditions, RLS symptoms get worse when relaxing or lessening activity, particularly during the evening and nighttime sleeping hours. Many people with RLS have trouble falling asleep and staying asleep. If not treated, RLS can cause extreme tiredness and daytime fatigue. A person's job, personal life and daily activities can be strongly affected due to exhaustion. A person can lose their ability to focus and have memory loss.

Many people with RLS also have a related sleep disorder called *periodic limb movements in sleep* (PLMS). With PLMS, a person jerks or bends their legs unintentionally during sleep. These movements can happen every 10 to 60 seconds, or hundreds of times, during the night. They can wake a person, disturb sleep, and wake bed partners. People who have both RLS and PLMS have trouble falling and staying asleep and can have extreme sleepiness during the day.

How common is RLS?

RLS affects about 2 to 15 percent of Americans. But, it may actually affect more people. Some people with RLS do not seek treatment because they fear they won't be taken seriously, their symptoms are too mild, or that the condition can't be treated. Health care providers sometimes think the symptoms of RLS are caused by something else, like nervousness, insomnia (not being able to sleep), stress, arthritis, muscle cramps, or aging.

RLS is thought to affect women more often than men. It can start at any age, even in young children, but most people with RLS are middle-aged or older. And, older people with RLS have symptoms more often and for longer periods of time. Young people who have RLS are sometimes thought to have "growing pains" or may be considered "hyperactive" because they cannot sit still in school.

What are the symptoms of RLS?

RLS symptoms are not the same for every person. They range from uncomfortable to painful and can vary in frequency. A person can have periods when RLS does not cause problems, but the symptoms usually return. Another person can have severe symptoms every day.

Common symptoms of RLS include:

- Unpleasant or uncomfortable feelings or sensations in the legs often described as creeping, crawling, tingling, pulling or painful, often producing an irresistible urge to move the legs. These feelings most often occur deep inside the leg, between the knee and ankle. While rare, they can also occur in the feet, thighs, arms, and hands. Most of these feelings involve both sides of the body, although they can happen on just one side of the body.
- Leg discomfort that occurs and gets worse when lying down or sitting for long periods of time. Long car trips, sitting in the movies, long-distance flights, and having a cast on can trigger RLS.
- Symptoms that happen and are worse later in the day, evening, and during the night.
- The need for constant movement of the legs (or other affected body parts) to lessen discomfort. People may pace the floor, move their legs when sitting, and toss and turn in bed.
- Having leg and sometimes arm movements when sleeping that you can't control.
- Trouble falling asleep or staying asleep.
- Sleepiness or tiredness during the day.

Certain medications, such as drugs for nausea, seizures, and psychosis, as well as some cold and allergy medicines, may make symptoms worse. Talk with your health care provider if you are taking any prescription or over-the-counter medicines.

What causes Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS)?

In most cases, the cause of RLS is not known. For about half of all RLS cases, there is a family history of the condition. People who have RLS in the family tend to be younger when symptoms start and develop symptoms slowly.

RLS is thought to be related to the following factors or conditions:

- Some women get RLS during pregnancy, especially in the last 3 months. But the symptoms usually go away about 4 weeks after having the baby.
- People with *anemia* (low iron levels) may be more likely to get RLS. Once low iron levels or anemia is corrected, symptoms can lessen.
- Chronic diseases such as *kidney failure*, *diabetes*, *Parkinson's disease*, and *peripheral neuropathy* (loss of feeling or numbness in the hands and feet) may be linked to RLS.

How is RLS diagnosed?

There are no tests for RLS. It can be hard to diagnose and is easily confused with other conditions. When someone with RLS goes to see a doctor, there is often nothing wrong that the doctor can see or detect with a physical exam. Diagnosis therefore depends on what a person describes to the doctor. To help make a diagnosis, the doctor may ask about all current and past medical problems, family history, and current medications. A complete physical and neurological exam may help identify other conditions that may be linked with RLS, such as nerve damage (neuropathy or a pinched nerve) or abnormalities in the blood vessels. Basic lab tests may be done to assess overall health and to rule out anemia.

How is RLS treated?

There is no cure for RLS. Sometimes RLS can be controlled by diagnosing and treating an underlying condition, such as *peripheral neuropathy* or *diabetes*. Treating the underlying disease can relieve many of the symptoms of RLS.

For people who have RLS with no diagnosed cause (like an underlying disease), treatment is focused on symptom relief. For those with mild to moderate symptoms, lifestyle changes are often suggested including:

- reducing or stopping use of caffeine, alcohol, and tobacco products;
- taking supplements to increase iron, folate, and magnesium in the body;
- developing and keeping a regular sleep schedule;
- getting moderate exercise;
- taking hot or cold baths, rubbing or massaging the legs or other affected body parts, or using a heating pad or ice pack.

Health care providers may prescribe medicine for symptom relief. Three types of drugs are most often prescribed:

- Benzodiazepines – these drugs depress the central nervous system and allow people to sleep more, despite the RLS symptoms. They should not be used by people with *sleep apnea* (a person stops breathing on and off during the night).
- Dopaminergic agents – are drugs used to treat Parkinson's disease. They have been shown to reduce RLS symptoms and nighttime leg movements.
- Opioids – are painkillers and relaxing drugs that can sometimes help people with severe RLS symptoms.

For More Information...

You can find out more about restless legs syndrome by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center at (800) 994-9662 or the following organizations:

National Center on Sleep Disorders Research

Phone Number(s): (301) 435-0199

Internet Address: <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/sleep>

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

Phone Number(s): (301) 592-8573

Internet Address: <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov>

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke

Phone Number(s): (800) 352-9424

Internet Address: <http://www.ninds.nih.gov>

Restless Legs Syndrome Foundation, Inc.

Phone Number(s): (507) 287-6465

Internet Address: <http://www.rls.org>

American Academy of Sleep Medicine

Phone Number(s): 708-492-0930

Internet Address: <http://www.aasmnet.org>

National Sleep Foundation

Phone Number(s): (202) 347-3471

Internet Address: <http://www.sleepfoundation.org>

This information was abstracted from fact sheets developed by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, including Facts About Restless Legs Syndrome, and the National Institute of Neurological Diseases and Stroke Restless Legs Syndrome Fact Sheet.

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This FAQ was reviewed by Carl E. Hunt, M.D., of the National Center on Sleep Disorders Research, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health.

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