

Trouble Staying Fully Charged? Learn About Restless Leg Syndrome Sleep Disorder

You have finished a long day and have settled into bed for a good night of sleep, and just when you are about to drift off to sleep you experience an uncomfortable feeling in your legs that makes you have to move them around. Ever experience that feeling? It might feel like an itch, and a creepy-crawly feeling, and just an irresistible urge to move your thighs or calves. So, you move around a bit, drift back into light sleep and then, you have the urge to move again. If you have ever experienced these uncomfortable and irresistible urges to move your legs that disrupt your sleep you may be experiencing the symptoms of a sleep disorder called Restless Leg Syndrome, or RLS.

What is RLS?

RLS begins with an uncomfortable feeling in your legs that causes an uncontrollable urge to move your legs when they are at rest or during sleep. These urges to move are temporarily relieved by leg movements and typically occur in the evening and nighttime hours. RLS sensations in the legs, and less commonly in the arms, torso and facial region, can profoundly disrupt sleep patterns, prevent you from falling asleep, and cause you to wake up during the night, disrupting your sleep. And all of this causes you to have lower quality and quantity of sleep.



RLS affects about 3-15% of us and is twice as common in women as men. It becomes more common, and has more severe symptoms, with age. More than 60% of folks who are diagnosed with RLS have a family history of the disorder, suggesting a genetic component.

Symptoms of RLS

If you have RLS you may experience one or more of the symptoms on this checklist:

- I have an overwhelming urge to move my legs when they are at rest, especially at night
- I have an urge to move my legs accompanied by unpleasant sensations (creeping, itching, pulling or tugging sensations)
- I find it impossible to resist the urges to move my legs
- When I move my legs it relieves the urges and unpleasant sensations
- My bed partner is kept awake due to my jerking leg movements
- I experience involuntary leg movements during waking hours
- I have excessive sleepiness during the day time



Consequences to Health, Wellbeing and Safety

RLS affects your ability to live life fully charged by impacting your sleep. The immediate consequence of RLS is a sleep debt resulting from reduced quality and/or quantity of sleep. A sleep debt results in fatigue, which has been shown to reduce alertness and cognitive performance. Long term health consequences of PLM are related to long-term accumulated sleep debt, and include increased risks of diabetes, heart disease and stroke and depression.

The effect of RLS on daytime activity can manifest in many different ways. You may experience very low energy levels or have difficulty staying alert, especially at times when demands for your mental attention wane. This can become a safety issue when driving, or when duty requirements focus on monitoring rather than active participation in activities.

Diagnosis and Treatment Options

There is no simple diagnostic test for RLS and in some cases, a formal diagnosis may be accomplished through an overnight sleep study where a sleep specialist can monitor you for body movements and arousals during sleep. Keeping a sleep diary documenting your experiences and providing that information to your primary care physician or sleep specialist can be helpful for them to make a formal diagnosis.

Because people experience RLS differently, treatment options vary and are specific to the individual. Living with RLS means treating the urge to move legs, and thus reducing the resulting arousals during sleep and sleep disruptions. Some treatments may include screening and treatment for iron and/or vitamin deficiencies. An evaluation of any current medication that you may be taking that can make the symptoms of RLS worse, such as drugs for high blood pressure, colds and allergies, will be completed. Also, the diagnosis and treatment of varicose veins has been shown to effectively relieve the symptoms of RLS. In some cases medications may be required to reduce the symptoms of RLS.

Seeking Treatment and Additional Information

If you think you may be suffering from RLS and it is affecting your ability to have energy and be alert during your daytime activities, contact your primary care physician and explain your situation. Be prepared to share thoughts about your sleep patterns, how you feel during the day, and any current medical or other issues you may be experiencing with your doctor. If you have been tracking your symptoms in a sleep diary, be sure to also share those results with your healthcare professional as well. Living with RLS does not mean giving up on a good night of sleep. Work with your healthcare professional to develop a treatment regime that is right for you and get back to living life fully charged.

For more detailed additional information on RLS, refer to the following web resources:

National Sleep Foundation – Information on RLS:

<http://sleepfoundation.org/sleep-disorders-problems/restless-legs-syndrome>

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke – Restless Leg Syndrome Fact Sheet:

http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/restless_legs/detail_restless_legs.htm