

Restless Legs Syndrome Fact Sheet

Cheryl A. Faber, M.D.

What is restless legs syndrome?

Restless legs syndrome (RLS) is a neurological disorder characterized by uncomfortable sensations in the legs and an uncontrollable urge to move when at rest in an effort to relieve these feelings. The quality of RLS sensations is difficult to convey, but is often described as “creepy-crawly”, tingly, or tugging. The sensations range in severity from uncomfortable to irritating to painful. The symptoms are often mistaken for muscle cramps (in adults) and “growing pains” (in children).

Characteristics of RLS include:

- Symptoms primarily occur at rest.
- Movement, rubbing or stretching can temporarily relieve the symptoms.
- Can be associated with involuntary leg jerking (myoclonus) and periodic leg movements of sleep (PLMS).
- Can interfere with sleep, leading to daytime fatigue and drowsiness.

RLS is estimated to affect 12 million Americans; however the actual number may be higher. RLS often goes undiagnosed or, in some cases, misdiagnosed. Some people with RLS will not seek medical attention, believing that they will not be taken seriously or that their condition is not treatable. Some physicians wrongly attribute the symptoms to nervousness, insomnia, stress, arthritis, muscle cramps, or aging. Symptoms can occur at any age, but tend to worsen with age.

What causes restless legs syndrome?

In most cases, the cause of RLS is unknown. Contributing factors can include:

- Family history of RLS
- Iron deficiency
- Certain medical conditions: kidney disease, diabetes, peripheral neuropathy
- Pregnancy
- Certain medications such as anti-nausea drugs, antipsychotic drugs, and some cold and allergy medications may aggravate symptoms.

How is restless legs syndrome diagnosed?

Currently, there is no single diagnostic test for RLS. The disorder is diagnosed clinically by evaluating the patient's history and symptoms. Occasionally a sleep study can be helpful to look for PLMS and to exclude other sleep disorders.

How is restless legs syndrome treated?

For individual with RLS associated with another medical condition, such as iron deficiency or diabetes, it is important to treat the primary condition. For patients with idiopathic RLS, treatment is directed toward relieving symptoms.

If symptoms are mild and infrequent, approaches such as taking a hot bath, massaging the legs, or using a heating pad or ice pack can help. For patients with more severe symptoms there are a number of very effective medications to treat RLS. Some of these drugs are also used for Parkinson's disease (Requip, Mirapex). Others are antiseizure medications such as gabapentin or clonazepam. Sometimes sedatives are used to help the patient get to sleep.

Unfortunately, no one drug is effective for everyone with RLS. What may be helpful to one individual may actually worsen symptoms for another. In addition, medications taken regularly may lose their effect, making it necessary to change medications periodically.

What is the prognosis of people with restless legs?

RLS is generally a lifelong condition for which there is no cure. Symptoms may gradually worsen with age, though more slowly for those with the idiopathic form of RLS than for patients who also suffer from an associated medical condition. Nevertheless, current therapies can control the disorder, minimizing symptoms and increasing periods of restful sleep. A diagnosis of RLS does not indicate the onset of another neurological disease.

Where can I get more information?

Restless Legs Syndrome Foundation

819 Second Street, SW
Rochester, MN 55902-2985
<http://www.rls.org>
Tel: 507-287-6465
Fax: 507-287-6312

National Sleep Foundation

1522 K Street NW
Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
<http://www.sleepfoundation.org>
Tel: 202-347-3471 (no public calls please)
Fax: 202-347-3472

Worldwide Education & Awareness for Movement Disorders (WE MOVE)

204 West 84th Street
New York, NY 10024
<http://www.wemove.org>
Tel: 800-437-MOV2 (6682) 212-875-8312
Fax: 212-875-8389