



A Patient's Guide to Understanding Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS)



What is RLS?

Restless legs syndrome (RLS) is a movement disorder of the *central nervous system*. The central nervous system is made up of the brain and all of the body's nerves. Its job is to carry messages between the brain and the body, and to tell the body what to do. These messages may be the wrong ones in people with RLS. Often, these people have unpleasant feelings deep in their legs when they are not moving and find that the best way to make these feelings go away is to move their legs all of the time.



What causes RLS?

There are two types of RLS: *primary RLS* and *secondary RLS*. Primary RLS has no known cause, although some research has shown that it may run in families. Secondary RLS is caused by another health condition. Some conditions that are commonly linked with RLS include low iron levels (*anemia*), pregnancy, and end-stage kidney (*renal*) disease. Certain medications, including antipsychotic drugs, anti-nausea drugs, and some cold and allergy medications, may also make symptoms of RLS worse.



What does sleep have to do with RLS?

RLS tends to keep people up at night, so some sleep disorders, including *insomnia*, *nocturnal leg cramps*, and *periodic limb movements (PLMs)*, are sometimes confused with RLS. In particular, PLMs are found in more than 80% of people who have RLS. The difference between PLMs and RLS is that PLMs occur during sleep, and RLS occurs when people are awake. PLMs are always *involuntary*, meaning that people have no control over their movements. For people with RLS, movement is *voluntary*. For this reason, RLS is often described as an *uncontrollable* urge to move the legs.



How is RLS treated?

Two drugs are FDA approved to treat RLS: *ropinirole* and *pramipexole*. These drugs work by helping to relieve the unpleasant feelings in the legs and the urge to move. RLS can also be treated using other types of drugs.

RLS symptoms can also be helped with *lifestyle changes*. Try these tips:

- Limit caffeine (such as coffee, tea, or soda), alcohol, and cigarettes
- Talk with your doctor about starting an exercise program
- Go to sleep at the same time every night, and make sure that you get enough sleep
- Avoid medications that might worsen RLS. Talk with your doctor before changing or stopping any medications that you are now taking



Effect on quality of life

The symptoms of RLS can negatively affect sleep and everyday activities. RLS makes it difficult for people to fall asleep and stay asleep at night, leaving them tired during the day and not able to perform at their best, whether at work or at home. Sitting still for extended periods of time, such as during a long car or plane ride, or a long meeting or movie, can also cause problems for people with RLS. Although there is no cure for RLS, medications and lifestyle changes can help to improve symptoms, well-being, and quality of life.

REFERENCES:

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. Restless Legs Syndrome Fact Sheet. Available at: http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/restless_legs/detail_restless_legs.htm. • Winkelman JW. Recognizing and treating restless legs syndrome: current standards. *Am J Med.* 2007;120(suppl 1A):S1-S29. • International Restless Legs Foundation. Available at: <http://www.irlsg.org/rlsinformation.html>. • Restless legs syndrome: detection and management in primary care. *Am Fam Phys.* 2000;62(1):108-114. All websites accessed August 6, 2007.

What does RLS feel like?

RLS is sometimes described as:

- Creeping or "creepy-crawly"
- Burning
- Tugging
- Soda bubbling in the veins
- Heebie-jeebies
- Itching bones

Get moving! Symptoms get better when you're moving around—whether it's simply moving your legs in bed or walking around.

Diagnosing RLS

Although there is no single test that your doctor can perform to determine if you have RLS, there are four "clues" that help to diagnose it:

- A desire to move the arms or legs, especially when you have strange feelings in your legs (for example, creeping or burning).
- Your symptoms are worse or happen only while you're resting and are better when you move around.
- You can't sit still (*restlessness*). You may find yourself pacing, rocking, or tossing and turning in bed.
- Your symptoms become worse at night.

Did you know...

- RLS affects about 12 million Americans, although experts say that this number may be much higher.
- It is more common in women.
- Although RLS usually occurs in older people, even children can be diagnosed with it.
- It can run in families—more than half of those with RLS have a family member who also has it.

For more information:
Talk to your physician or visit
www.LegDisorders.org