How Restless Legs Syndrome Affects Your Sleep

Have you ever heard about or wondered if you Restless Legs Syndrome?

January 3, 2022 By Michael Breus, PhD

You may be curious if you've had a strong, irresistible urge to kick or move your legs while laying in bed, especially if it wakes you up or keeps you from sleeping. Maybe this urge is also accompanied by an itchy or uncomfortable feeling. If that experience is keeping you up or waking you up, then you may have Restless Legs Syndrome.

Restless Legs Syndrome itself is not a dangerous condition, but it can be a sign of a more serious pre-existing condition you may not know about. Left untreated, this condition can also make it difficult to fall asleep and stay asleep. It can contribute to daytime sleepiness as well as sleep disorders like insomnia— in fact, almost 90 percent of people with Restless Legs Syndrome also report at least one sleep-related condition.

What is Restless Legs Syndrome?

Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS), also known as Willis Ekbom Disease, is a neurological disorder where a patient has an uncontrollable urge to move their legs, thanks to an unpleasant feeling compelling them to move.

This uncomfortable sensation in your lower limbs, often described as an itching, creeping, or throbbing feeling, is the most prominent symptom of RLS. RLS sufferers will often keep their limbs in constant motion to either relieve or prevent these feelings— this is where the "restless" part of Restless Legs Syndrome gets its name.

As you can imagine or may experience, the unpleasant sensation of RLS and the subsequent movement can make getting a good night's sleep very difficult. Symptoms usually begin when your body is at rest, or when you've been sitting or laying down for a while— this is especially true at night, where symptoms also tend to worsen.

The compulsion to move your limbs can negatively impact your ability to fall or stay asleep. Restless Legs Syndrome is sometimes associated with other serious conditions, including:

- Iron Deficiency Anemia

- Parkinson’s Disease
- Kidney Disease

Most people with RLS also have a condition called Periodic Limb Movement Disorder, or PLMD. It’s similar to RLS where a patient will compulsively move their limbs during sleep, except that it’s not accompanied by the discomfort that comes with Restless Legs Syndrome. Many PLMD patients are unaware that they are moving during the night, but they can sometimes be awoken by these movements.

What Causes Restless legs Syndrome?

While mainly adults experience symptoms, no one’s really sure what causes most cases of Restless Legs Syndrome. Cases of RLS that don’t have a specific cause are often known as Primary RLS. Interestingly enough, Restless Legs Syndrome could have a genetic factor too. RLS tends to have an earlier onset age— 45 years or lower— in patients with a family history of RLS.

Cases of Restless Legs Syndrome that do have an identifiable cause are known as secondary RLS. Secondary RLS develops as a result of conditions including iron deficiency and peripheral neuropathy, or nerve damage outside of the brain and spinal cord.

Pregnancy is also a common cause of RLS, but those symptoms aren’t persistent and normally disappear following delivery.

Treatment Options for Restless Legs Syndrome

A number of medications can be prescribed to RLS patients, including iron or magnesium supplements, anti-seizure medications, Gabapentin enacarbil, and benzodiazepines. While medication can be helpful especially for more severe symptoms, there are also some healthy lifestyle changes you can try first to help treat RLS and get the restful sleep you need.

1. Consume less Caffeine or Alcohol

If you’ve been here for a while, then you already know that consuming caffeine or alcohol too close to bedtime can really mess with your sleep. Caffeine’s stimulant effects keep us awake, while alcohol can contribute to snoring as well as more serious sleep disorders like insomnia, circadian rhythm abnormalities, and short sleep duration.

A number of modifiable lifestyle factors, including consumption of caffeine, nicotine, or alcohol can increase your risk of RLS or exacerbate pre-existing symptoms.

Healthy lifestyle choices have an impact on RLS and the propensity to develop it as well. A study has shown that participants who exercised regularly, were at a normal weight, and consumed some alcohol had a lower risk of developing Restless Legs Syndrome. In fact, there was a correlation between a person’s number of healthy lifestyle habits and a lower risk of RLS.

2. Proper Sleep Hygiene

Proper sleep hygiene can make a huge difference in your sleep quality as well as helping to treat your RLS symptoms. A few changes you can make to improve your sleep hygiene include:

- Consistently going to bed and waking up at the same times each day
- Ensure your bedroom is a comfortable sleep environment, and make positive changes where necessary. Having a comfortable supportive mattress should be a key consideration. If you haven't replaced your mattress in the past 10 years, it may be time to consider a new mattress— here's how to choose a perfect mattress.
- Put away all your electronic devices, including phones, computers, and televisions, at least an hour before bed
- Take enough time to relax before bed— a warm bath or shower can be especially beneficial in relieving symptoms of Restless Legs Syndrome

Your sleep schedule is just as important to your rest as your sleep hygiene is. To figure out how much sleep you need each night, check out my sleep calculator tool.

3. Exercise!

Not only can regular, moderate exercise help you look and feel great, but it can help you sleep well too!

One study separated 28 participants experiencing RLS symptoms into two groups: One group was assigned an exercise regimen, while the other, the Control group, was not. After 12 weeks, the exercise group showed significant improvement in their symptoms, compared to the control group, who did not show notable improvement.

Be sure not to exercise too close to your bedtime though— that can actually make it harder to fall asleep on time. Try exercising earlier, or in the morning, to jumpstart your body and feel energized throughout the day.

If you think that your RLS symptoms are contributing to a sleep disorder or worsening an underlying condition, such as sleep apnea, get in touch with your doctor or a sleep specialist. They can help you set up a sleep study and figure out your treatment options. If you need help finding accredited sleep experts near you, I recommend using this tool by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine.

If you find yourself fidgeting in bed every so often, don't worry! Fidgeting is a normal and temporary response to everyday stimuli. RLS can really make getting a good night's sleep difficult,

but it doesn’t have to. As long as you are able to address the problem and treat it appropriately, that restlessness can soon be replaced by restful night’s sleep.

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