

Introduction

Restless legs syndrome is also known as RLS. RLS is a disorder that causes a strong urge to move your legs. The urge to move often happens along with strange and unpleasant feelings in the legs. Moving your legs relieves the urge and unpleasant feelings.

RLS can range from mild to severe. Lifestyle changes can help some people. Medicines may also be used to reduce the symptoms of RLS.

This reference summary will help you understand restless legs syndrome. It covers the symptoms and causes of RLS. It also talks about diagnosis and treatment options.

What is Restless Legs Syndrome?

RLS causes a powerful urge to move your legs. It also causes the legs to become uncomfortable when a person is sitting or lying down. Moving can provide temporary relief.

RLS can range from mild to severe based on:

- The severity of symptoms and how often they happen.
- How easily moving around relieves symptoms.
- How much the symptoms disturb sleep.

There are two types of RLS. One type starts early in life and tends to run in families. Symptoms appear before 45 years of age. It may even start in childhood. RLS that begins early in life is often permanent. This means it lasts the rest of your life. Over time, symptoms will slowly get worse and happen more often. People with mild cases may not have symptoms for long periods of time.



Another type of RLS starts later in life. Symptoms appear after age 45. This type of RLS often starts suddenly. The symptoms usually do not get worse over time. RLS that starts later in life may be caused by certain medicines. It may also be caused by health problems. Sometimes RLS will go away if the underlying cause is treated.

Symptoms

There are 4 major signs of restless legs syndrome:

1. A strong urge to move the legs, with or without unpleasant feelings in the legs.
2. Symptoms that start or get worse when a person is inactive.
3. Relief that comes from moving the legs.
4. Symptoms that start or get worse in the evening.

RLS gets its name from the urge to move the legs when sitting or lying down. The legs feel “restless.” This often makes a person with RLS want to get up and move around. Moving can help ease the discomfort that RLS sometimes causes. But moving only helps for a short time.

Some people may move by:

- Jiggling the legs.
- Pacing and walking.
- Rubbing the legs.
- Stretching and flexing.
- Tossing and turning.



People who have RLS often describe having unpleasant feelings. These feelings can include:

- Burning.
- Crawling.
- Creeping.
- Electric shocks.
- Itching.
- Pulling.
- Tingling.



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Usually the unpleasant feelings will seem to come from deep within the legs. Often symptoms are felt in both legs. But the feelings can happen in one leg, move from one leg to the other, or affect one leg more than the other. Severe RLS may cause pain. But the pain is more of an ache than a sharp, stabbing pain. When RLS is severe, a person may also have the urge to move his or her arms.

Children may describe RLS symptoms differently than adults. In children, RLS may cause a high level of activity. The child may seem to always be moving or fidgeting. They may talk too much and be unable to focus.

RLS can make it hard to fall or stay asleep. Lack of sleep can make a person very tired during the day. It can interfere with school or work. Not getting enough sleep can also cause depression, mood swings, and other health problems.

A person with RLS may have long periods without any symptoms. Symptoms may not appear again for days, weeks, or months.

Causes

In most cases, the cause of RLS is not known. But research suggests that the main cause of RLS may be an incorrect use of iron or a lack of iron in the brain. The brain uses iron to make a chemical called dopamine. It works in the parts of the brain that control movement.

Many health problems can affect how much iron is used in the brain or how it is used. These problems include:

- Diabetes.
- Iron deficiency.
- Kidney failure.
- Parkinson's disease.
- Pregnancy.
- Rheumatoid arthritis.

All of these health problems increase a person's risk of RLS. People whose family members have RLS are more likely to have it as well. This shows there may be a genetic link to how iron is used by the brain.



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Nerve damage in the legs or feet may cause RLS. Nerve damage can also worsen RLS symptoms. Many health problems can cause this type of nerve damage, including diabetes.

Some medicines can cause temporary RLS, including:

- Calcium channel blockers.
- Cold and allergy medicines that contain antihistamines.
- Medicines used to treat mental health disorders, such as antidepressants or antipsychotics.
- Medicines used to treat nausea.



Calcium channel blockers are drugs that may be used to lower blood pressure. They can also relieve chest pain and treat an irregular heartbeat. Antihistamines are drugs that can be used to treat allergy symptoms.

RLS symptoms may also be triggered by certain substances. Caffeine, tobacco, and alcohol are some examples. They can make RLS symptoms worse.

Diagnosis

To be diagnosed with RLS, you must have all 4 major signs:

1. A strong urge to move the legs, with or without unpleasant feelings in the legs.
2. Symptoms that start or get worse when a person is inactive.
3. Relief that comes from moving the legs.
4. Symptoms that start or get worse in the evening or night.



Your health care provider will first ask about your medical history. He or she will also ask about your symptoms. Make sure to tell your health care provider if your symptoms are making it hard for you to sleep. You may also be asked about your family's medical history. The most common type of RLS tends to run in families. You are more likely to have RLS if someone in your family has it.

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A physical exam will be done. This rules out underlying causes of RLS. It also helps rule out other causes of your symptoms. Right now, no medical tests can diagnose RLS. But blood tests can check your iron levels. Muscle or nerve tests can help check for health problems that worsen RLS. These tests can also check for problems that have symptoms similar to those caused by RLS.

Rarely, a sleep study may be done. A sleep study measures how much and how well you sleep.

If your health care provider thinks you have RLS, he or she may prescribe certain medicines. These medicines can ease the symptoms of RLS. If they work, it means you have RLS.

Treatment

RLS has no cure. If a health problem or medicine triggers RLS, it may go away or get better if the trigger is relieved or stopped. RLS can still be treated. The goals of treatment are to:

- Prevent or relieve symptoms.
- Treat or correct underlying conditions that may trigger or worsen RLS.
- Improve sleep.

Mild cases of RLS are treated with lifestyle changes. Sometimes medicines may be needed. More severe cases of RLS are usually treated with daily medicines.

Lifestyle changes can prevent or ease the symptoms of RLS. Sometimes this is the only treatment needed. Caffeine, tobacco, and alcohol may make symptoms of RLS worse. Many people with RLS avoid these substances. This can help limit or prevent RLS symptoms. Some medicines can cause or worsen RLS symptoms. Tell your health care provider which medicines you are taking. He or she may stop or change some of them.



Adopting good sleep habits can help some people with RLS. Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day. Remove objects that can interfere with sleep, such as a TV or phone. Also keep your bedroom as dark and quiet as possible to help you sleep. Doing a difficult activity before going to bed may help some people. It can ease RLS symptoms to focus your energy on one task. Others use methods to help them relax before going to bed.

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You can ease or prevent RLS symptoms with regular exercise. Sitting for most of the day can make symptoms of RLS worse. Increase your activity during the day to ease RLS symptoms at night. Specific activities may also help relieve RLS symptoms, such as:

- Massaging the affected limbs.
- Taking a hot or cold bath.
- Using heat or ice packs on the affected limbs.
- Walking or stretching.

If these changes do not ease your symptoms, you may need medicines. No one medicine works for all people with RLS.

You may need to try different medicines and doses to find the best treatment. It may take several attempts. Some of the medicines used to treat RLS are also used to treat Parkinson's disease. Some of these medicines make dopamine. Others act like dopamine. This controls the urge to move the legs.

Other medicines can also treat RLS. These may include:

- Medicines for epilepsy.
- Muscle relaxants.
- Narcotic pain medicines.
- Sleep medicines.

Often a combination of medicines works best.

Medicines often have unwanted side effects. Talk to your health care provider about what you should expect. You can change medicines if you have any problems. It may take a while to find a treatment that works for you. Sometimes medicines may help RLS symptoms for a while and then stop working. Symptoms may also start appearing earlier in the day. These are common problems. If they happen, your medicine may be changed.



Summary

Restless legs syndrome is also known as RLS. RLS causes a strong urge to move your legs. This urge to move often happens along with strange and unpleasant feelings in the legs. Moving your legs eases symptoms.

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In most cases, there is no known cause for RLS. However, research suggests that the main cause of RLS is an incorrect use of iron or a lack of iron in the brain. RLS may also be caused by genetics, nerve damage, or certain medicines. RLS has no cure. But symptoms can be controlled. Treatment includes lifestyle changes and medicines.

The goals of treatment are to:

- Prevent or relieve symptoms.
- Treat or correct underlying conditions that may trigger or worsen RLS.
- Improve sleep.

Often RLS is a lifelong condition. Talk to your health care provider for more information about living with RLS.



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