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Restless Legs Syndrome

Overview

What is restless legs syndrome (RLS)?

Restless legs syndrome (also called RLS) is a condition in which your legs feel very uncomfortable when you are sitting or lying down. It affects both men and women and can occur at any age (including during childhood), but often worsens with age and becomes a problem for older adults. RLS can make sleeping and traveling difficult and uncomfortable. Some cases of RLS are related to other conditions, such as pregnancy, iron-deficiency anemia or kidney failure. Other cases of RLS have no known cause. RLS may be hereditary, which means it can run in your family.

Symptoms

What does it feel like to have RLS?

People who have RLS often say it's difficult to describe their symptoms. If you have RLS, you may have a "creepy-crawly" feeling in your legs that makes you want to move around. You may experience achy, tingly or burning sensations in your legs, which can make it difficult to sleep or sit for long periods of time. Moving your legs makes the feeling go away for a few minutes, but it comes back after you sit or lie still again. Your legs may also twitch when you try and sleep (also called periodic limb movements of sleep or PLMS).

Diagnosis & Tests

How does my doctor know I have RLS?

Tell your doctor about the restless sensations. He or she will ask you questions about your symptoms, such as when they start and whether you're able to do anything to make them go away. He or she may also ask if any other people in your family have similar symptoms.

Tell your doctor about any medicines (including over-the-counter medicines) that you're taking. Certain medicines can make RLS symptoms worse. Your doctor can recommend another medicine if this seems to be happening to you.

Treatment

What is the treatment for RLS?

Treatment for RLS includes medicines and lifestyle changes. See the box for a list of things that you can do at home to help relieve your symptoms.

Medicines used to treat Parkinson's disease can help reduce tremors and twitching in the

legs. If your iron levels are low, your doctor may prescribe an iron supplement. Sleep aids, muscle relaxants (called benzodiazepines) and pain medicines (called opioids) may also relieve symptoms. In some cases, an anticonvulsant medicine (usually used to stop seizures) can be helpful. For many cases of RLS, a combination of medicines is usually needed to best treat the condition. Your doctor may prescribe several trials of medicine before finding one that works best for your case of RLS.

Lifestyle changes to treat RLS

- For mild symptoms, use an over-the-counter pain reliever to reduce twitching and restless sensations.
- Cut back on alcohol, caffeine and tobacco.
- Try taking a hot bath and massaging your legs before bedtime to help you relax.
- Relaxation techniques, such as meditation and yoga, can help you relax before bed.
- Apply warm or cool packs, which can help relieve sensations in your legs.
- Try to distract your mind by reading or doing a crossword puzzle while you wait for sleep to come.
- Moderate exercise may help, but don't overdo it -- exercising vigorously or late in the day may make symptoms worse.
- Try to go to bed at the same time every night and wake up at the same time every morning. Also try to get a sufficient amount of sleep each night.

What else can I do?

Keep your doctor posted on how you're feeling. He or she can suggest different relaxation techniques and can change your medicine if it's not helping. You may want to join a support group to talk to other people who are suffering from RLS. Also, because RLS tends to run in families, you may want to talk to your relatives about your RLS and see if they have similar symptoms.

Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- What types of medicines are used to treat about restless legs syndrome (RLS)?
- Could there be another condition causing my RLS?
- Are there any lifestyle changes I could make that might help my RLS?
- Can you recommend an RLS support group?
- I've heard smoking may cause RLS. Can you help me quit?

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