

Restless Legs Syndrome and Periodic Limb Movement Disorder



Restless Legs Syndrome

Restless legs syndrome (RLS) is a disorder that often occurs in otherwise healthy individuals. It is characterized by discomfort in the lower limbs while at rest, usually just prior to sleep or during periods of wakefulness at night. People often describe the discomfort as an aching pain, or as a “tingling,” “creeping/crawling” or other bothersome sensation. RLS is more common in older people, but can occur in young adults as well.

People who suffer from RLS often report difficulties falling asleep or staying asleep. These difficulties may range from mild to severe, but in many cases result in significant nighttime distress and daytime fatigue. Sufferers often report the problem of “insomnia” to their doctors; however, it is important to distinguish RLS from primary insomnia because the treatments are different. RLS does not improve with conventional treatments for “insomnia.”

One interesting fact about RLS is that symptoms usually occur when the sufferer is at rest, but are not present during periods of activity. Therefore, people with RLS often report that the discomfort in their limbs goes away if they get out of bed and walk about. Even non-physical activity can seemingly reduce the symptoms of RLS!

Treatment of RLS can begin at home. Many people find relief from massage, applied heat, or hot baths before bedtime. A number of medications also have been found to be effective and safe in the treatment of RLS. These medications act on the neurotransmitter substance “dopamine.”

Periodic Limb Movement Disorder

Periodic limb movement disorder (PLMD) is a condition in which brief movements of the lower limbs occur repetitively during sleep. These movements usually last between a half second and five seconds, and repeat once or twice per minute for long stretches of the night. Movements can be mild, such as the movement of a toe, or severe, such as a powerful leg jerk or kick. Some sleepers have reported that they’ve literally made their spouses black and blue from kicking they’ve done while asleep!

PLMD is rare in people under 30 years of age, but is more common in older people. Many people with this condition are unaware of the problem, unless they also have RLS along with it. Therefore, a common report from people with PLMD is difficulty falling asleep and/or staying asleep. Since the movements associated with PLMD disrupt sleep and prevent the sleeper from enjoying deep, restful sleep, the sufferer also often feels that sleep is not restful or restorative.

The treatment of PLMD usually involves the use of medications that act on the neurotransmitter substance “dopamine.” Treatment of underlying causes of PLMD, such as iron deficiency, also provides relief.

Evaluation of RLS and PLMD

The evaluation of RLS and PLMD always involves discussion with your doctor. Your doctor may refer you to a sleep laboratory for overnight evaluation in order to make the diagnosis of RLS or PLMD, and to help determine an appropriate treatment plan.

For information about RLS and PLMD, speak to your doctor. Additional information may be found at www.clinilabs.com, and patient information brochures may be obtained by calling 212-994-5100.

Clinilabs Sleep Disorders Institute is a full-service sleep disorders center, with locations in Manhattan and Westchester, that specializes in the evaluation and treatment of disorders of sleep and wakefulness in adults and children. At the leading edge of clinical service, the Institute provides standards of care not available at other sleep centers. The Institute's main facility is accredited by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, and our offices are affiliated with New York's finest hospitals.