

What is Restless Legs Syndrome, RLS?

RLS, or Willis-Ekbom disease (WED), is a disorder where there is an uncontrollable urge to move the limbs. It is described as a creepy-crawly sensation that worsens at rest. It may appear during pregnancy or may be a side effect of medications. These feelings tend to be most bothersome in the late evening and may prevent someone from falling asleep. It does tend to run in families although a family history of WED is not necessary for the diagnosis.

According to the Restless Legs Syndrome Foundation, RLS is generally grouped into the following classifications:

- **Primary or familial:** when RLS is found to run in a family.
- **Secondary:** when RLS appears to be the result of another condition such as pregnancy, low iron levels, chronic disease, or as a side effect of medications.
- **Idiopathic:** when there is no family history of RLS and no known associated conditions.

How is it diagnosed?

Most people describe a creepy-crawly sensation that worsens in the evening and when they are still. A sleep study may show periodic limb movements of sleep (PLMS). Although there is overlap between people who experience RLS and those with PLMS, they are not the same thing. There is no test to diagnose RLS. It is based on clinical symptoms. There have been various tests proposed (such as the SIT test) but most of the time, all that is needed is for someone to experience these symptoms.

What are the symptoms of RLS?

The main symptoms of RLS include:

- An uncomfortable sensation in your legs or arms giving you an overwhelming urge to move them
- Symptoms occur or worsen when you are still such as during a meeting or while on a plane
- Symptoms improve when you move your limbs around
- Symptoms are more bothersome in the evening

The sensations most commonly occur in the calf area, but can be felt anywhere in one or both legs. Some people also experience the discomfort in their feet, arms or hands. People with RLS sometimes have trouble going to sleep. Feeling a need for constant movement, many people delay trying to go to sleep and may instead pace or move their legs to prevent these uncomfortable sensations.

Who gets RLS?

According to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, RLS appears to affect women slightly more often than men. It is most commonly reported by middle-aged and elderly people; but younger people have also been known to experience it. It can be mistaken for growing pains in children. Pregnant women may also experience RLS, especially during the last months of pregnancy.

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What are the treatment options for Restless Legs Syndrome, RLS?

Typically, the first step is to look at possible underlying causes of RLS/WED such as a low blood iron level. It is a common side effect of medications such as anti-depressants, allergy pills, or over-the-counter sleep aids. There are many treatment options available.

Medications or supplements- For patients with low iron levels, increasing iron intake or an iron infusion can alleviate or eliminate the condition. In more severe cases of RLS, drug therapy might be recommended. Generally, clinicians choose from dopamine agonists (medications that mimic dopamine), benzodiazepines (central nervous system depressants), opioids, or anticonvulsants. Treatment is personalized for each person.

Neurostimulator Pad (Relaxis) -Helps to reduce nighttime leg jerking in patients experiencing severe RLS by sitting on this neurostimulator pad. The therapy is done before bedtime for 15 to 30 minutes. It has a battery and can also be used when traveling.

Foot brace (Restiffic)- This is a wrap placed on the feet at night. It presses on a pressure point that helps to relieve the uncomfortable sensations at night. There is objective data showing that it is effective .

Behavioral Change- For mild to moderate cases of RLS (or secondary RLS), your doctor may advise behavioral or lifestyle changes. Some RLS patients find that walking, stretching, yoga, massage, hot or cold baths and relaxation rituals help alleviate their symptoms. Avoiding caffeine and nicotine may also be helpful.

Home Remedies- include, hot baths, leg massages, heating pads, ice packs, aspirin or other pain relievers, and the elimination of caffeine and nicotine. Some supplements that might be helpful include vitamin E, B12, C, magnesium, and calcium. Many people swear by putting a bar of soap in the bed and although there is no data supporting this, it remains a popular practice.

If you or a loved one are affected by restless legs syndrome (RLS), you are not alone. The Restless Legs Syndrome Foundation reports that up to 8% of Americans experience the disorder. Others may experience RLS, but pass it off as a general discomfort or cramping in their legs, not realizing that it is a specific (and treatable) condition.