



Restless Legs Syndrome

If a strong urge to move your legs is keeping you up at night, you're not alone. This is the most common symptom of restless legs syndrome (RLS), a condition that affects millions of people around the globe.

The good news is there are ways to manage it and treatments that can help. This handout will walk you through what RLS is, how doctors diagnose it, and treatment options that can help you get a better night's rest.

What Is RLS?

RLS, or Willis–Ekbom disease, isn't a muscle or joint disorder. It's not caused by stress, anxiety, or poor sleep habits. It's a condition that involves how the brain controls movement and sensations in your legs.

It causes an uncontrollable urge to move your legs. People sometimes describe this feeling as creeping, pulling, tingling, aching, or crawling deep within the legs. These symptoms usually happen when you're resting, sitting, or laying down for long periods, especially in the evening or at night.

Movement like walking, stretching, or shaking your legs may give you temporarily relief. Because symptoms are worse at night, RLS often makes it hard to fall asleep and stay asleep. Over time, this disrupted sleep can lead to daytime sleepiness, mood changes, and trouble concentrating.

How RLS Is Diagnosed

Doctors aren't sure what causes RLS, but there are certain factors that may increase your odds of having the condition. It often runs in families and is more common



and more severe in people over 50. It affects more women than men and can occur during pregnancy.

There's no single test for RLS. Doctors usually diagnose it based on a physical exam, your symptoms, and medical history. They look for four key features:

1. An urge to move the legs, usually with uncomfortable sensations
2. Symptoms that begin or worsen during rest
3. Relief with movement
4. Symptoms that are worse in the evening or at night

Your provider may recommend testing like iron studies, bloodwork, or sleep studies to help identify what's contributing to your RLS. Finding and treating underlying factors like iron deficiency can greatly reduce symptoms for some people.

Managing RLS

Treatment may look different for each person with RLS. It depends on how often your symptoms happen and how severe they are.

Lifestyle changes may help. Try to keep a regular sleep schedule. Avoid caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol in the evening. Get moderate exercise earlier in the day. Also, leg stretches, massage, and heat or cold therapy may help ease discomfort.

Prescription medication is another option. Doctors can choose and adjust medications carefully to manage symptoms and minimize side effects, but some drugs can cause problems over time. This could include dependency or side effects like drowsiness, dizziness, or nausea. In some cases, symptoms may improve at first but later come back stronger or start earlier in the day—this is called augmentation.

One of the most exciting developments in RLS treatment is that new non-drug options have become available over the past several years. Research studies have shown that wearable therapy that delivers Tonic Motor Activation (TOMAC) can safely help reduce RLS symptoms in many cases. This special kind of high-frequency nerve stimulation calms the overactive nerve activity that creates the restless sensations in the legs. Doctors may recommend it as a safe alternative to medication or as a complement to prescription treatment.

RLS is usually a long-term condition, but it is manageable. Keep in mind that symptoms may change over time, and treatments may need to be adjusted. Pay attention to changes and stay in touch with your health care provider to explore all your treatment options.

With the right combination of lifestyle changes, treatment, and follow-up care, better sleep and quality of life is possible. ■

Notes



This patient primer is sponsored by Noctrix Health, Inc., the medical device company that makes Nidra, a first-in-class, non-drug therapy for reducing symptoms of restless legs syndrome and improving sleep quality.