



## RLS AND PLMS

Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS) and Periodic Limb Movement Syndrome are very common and many patients will suffer from both.

# RLS & PLMS

Restless Legs  
Syndrome  
and Periodic  
Limb Movement  
Syndrome



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## WHAT IS RESTLESS LEGS SYNDROME?

Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS) is a problem where you feel significant discomfort in your limbs, particularly your legs, whilst you are awake. People use a variety of words to talk about how it feels in their limbs e.g. pulling, drawing, crawling, wormy, boring, tingling, itchy, pins and needles, prickly and painful. It tends to affect the legs much more than the arms.

When it happens, you feel a very strong urge to move the affected limbs. Often there is no way to resist it. People may experience RLS when they sit for a long time such as at a desk, in a car, seeing a movie or travelling on a plane. RLS can also affect you when you lie down to sleep as it is always worse in the evenings. This may mean that it is hard to get to sleep. If you do get to sleep, you might wake up many times during the night, and not get as much sleep as you need. You can end up feeling irritable, anxious and depressed.

## WHO GETS IT?

RLS is found in 2 to 5% of people (both men and women).

It can start at any age, but the risk of having it goes up as you grow older, and it tends to be more serious in the elderly. RLS may be associated with pregnancy.

## HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE IT?

Diagnosis is based on assessment of the symptoms you describe to your doctor. There is no lab test to work out if you have RLS.

## WHAT CAUSES IT?

If your parents had RLS, your risk of having it is higher (30 - 50 percent). RLS may occur in pregnancy and is more likely in the last six months. In this case, RLS will usually go away after giving birth. Your diet can also cause RLS. Problems may include not getting enough iron and it has been associated with too much caffeine, smoking and alcohol. Other health problems can also lead to RLS such as anaemia and kidney problems.

## HOW CAN RLS BE TREATED?

There are many ways to make the legs feel better including:

- Walking, rubbing, massaging them, doing knee bends or just moving them. If you don't move them, your legs will often jump by themselves.
- It can help to cut down on your caffeine, nicotine and alcohol intake.
- If your RLS stems from another problem (e.g. anaemia) then the best thing to do is to treat the cause. Your GP may do a blood test to check your levels of a number of important indicators.
- In serious cases, there are medications that you can take to control your RLS. These are related to the dopamine neurochemical system e.g. ropinorole and pramipexole. These medications are also used for Parkinson's disease but RLS and Parkinson's disease are not related. Some patients (usually < 10 percent) who have been taking these medications for a long time at large doses, may find that their RLS gets worse. This is called augmentation. There are other medications that can be used in combination with the dopamine medications.

## CAN RLS GET WORSE OR BETTER BY ITSELF?

For most people where there is not a reversible factor (such as iron deficiency) RLS may gradually get worse with age.

## WHAT IS PERIODIC LIMB MOVEMENTS SYNDROME?

Periodic Limb Movements Syndrome (PLMS) is when your legs or arms move when you're asleep. Patients will not notice this as they are asleep. It happens every 10 to 60 seconds and is out of your control. There are various ways this can happen such as flexing of the toe or foot, bending of the ankle or knee or twitching of the hip. This tends to occur over and over. As a result of the movements, your sleep is fragmented which will make you feel unrefreshed during the day and sleepy.

Often, the way people know that they have PLMS is when their bed partner complains of being kicked. The blankets may be all over the place in the morning. Some people may move their legs in this way hundreds of times per night. In some cases this can disrupt the sleep of the person with PLMS or that of their bed partner. For others, PLMS may not be a problem at all. It only needs to be treated if it is causing a problem.

## HOW COMMON IS PLMS?

PLMS is more common in older age.

It affects 25% of those between 50 and 60 years old. About 40% of people 65 or older may have PLMS.

As many as 80 percent of people with RLS also have PLMS. These problems mean they may find it hard to both fall asleep and stay asleep and they may feel fatigued or sleepy during the day.

## HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE PLMS?

This can be tested with an overnight Sleep Study. Leads are put on your body to measure movement and sleep.

## HOW CAN PLMS BE TREATED?

As the cause of PLMS is similar to RLS i.e. disturbed dopamine metabolism, the same drugs that are used to treat RLS may be used. Cutting down on caffeine, alcohol, and smoking can also help.

We recommend that you seek further advice from a sleep specialist.

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