

Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS)

RLS presents as an urge to move the legs often with an uncomfortable sensation. This sensation is often difficult to describe but may feel like ‘muscles pulling and stretching on their own’ or ‘ants running up and down your bones’. This urge to move is worse or only occurs at night, when at rest and is relieved while moving. Walking around, placing the feet on a cold floor or massaging them can relieve the sensations. Once the moving stops the sensation often comes back. The disorder is diagnosed on history alone and if mild may not cause any disruption to sleep

If the disorder is more severe the urge to move often interferes with falling asleep. The restlessness is most severe between 6pm and 2am and often doesn’t occur during the day. Some patients with RLS find their sleep to be much better in the early morning or during the day. The RLS can be aggravated by excessive exercise, caffeine and some medications such as antihistamines and anti-depressants.

RLS often occurs in families with multiple people involved and occurs in about 10% of the population. RLS is more common (up to 30%) in people with any cause of iron deficiency such as pregnancy, kidney failure or peripheral neuropathy.

Once asleep the restlessness often continues with twitching legs occurring every 20 seconds during sleep. This disorder is called periodic limb movement disorder (PLMD). These leg movements interfere with sleep leading to unrefreshing sleep and daytime fatigue.

RLS and PLMD are indications of a neurological disorder resulting in an increased activity in the spinal cord and may need to be treated if sleep is affected. While massage, calcium supplements and exercise may help many patients require medication. There are various medications that can control the restlessness allowing easier sleep onset and better quality sleep but the treatment is usually life long.

If you are concerned that you may have restless legs syndrome or periodic limb movements that is interfering with your sleep please mention it to your doctor.