

What are Restless Legs Syndrome and Period Limb Movements Disorder?



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.

What is Restless Legs Syndrome?

Restless legs syndrome (RLS) is a sensorimotor (moving) neurological disorder that causes discomfort in the legs and uncontrollable urges to move to relieve the discomfort which is often described as tingly, prickly, creeping, painful, and tugging like insects crawling on your body. The main symptoms of RLS include:

- ✓ An irritating sensation in your legs that gives you an overwhelming urge to walk around and move them.
- ✓ Symptoms occur or worsen when you are lying down, sitting, resting or relaxing for long periods of time.
- ✓ Symptoms improve when you move your legs around.
- ✓ Symptoms are worse in the evening and throughout the night, particularly when you lie down.
- ✓ Little movements of the toes, feet or legs may be visible when you rest.

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 generally 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 the feelings of restless legs.

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, or chronic disease.
- **Idiopathic:** when there is no family history of RLS and no known associated conditions.

What is Period Limb Movements in Sleep (PLMS)?

According to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, approximately 80% of RLS patients also experience a disorder known as Periodic Limb Movements in Sleep (PLMS). The movements occur during non-REM sleep and can again occur at 2 hour intervals throughout the night. The patient is aware only of restless or poor sleep and daytime fatigue. PLMS affects 5% to 10% of the general population and generally increases with age. PLMS contributed to the inability to sleep in 20% of people diagnosed with insomnia. Also it can be prevalent in children with ADHD symptomatology.

- ◀ sudden jerking or bending of the legs during sleep
- ◀ movements that occur every 5 to 90 seconds and last between 0.5 and 10 seconds

The movements range from small shudders of the ankles and toes to kicking and flailing of the arms and legs. Sometimes, oral, nasal and abdominal movements also occur. The periodic jerking often awakens the individual (as well as their sleeping partner) and significantly disturbs their quality of sleep.

It is important to note that people experience the symptoms at different intensity levels; some describe the sensations as merely bothersome, while others describe them as quite painful.