



# Restless Legs Syndrome

## Topic Overview

### What is restless legs syndrome?

Restless legs syndrome (RLS) is a disorder related to sensation and movement. People with restless legs syndrome have an unpleasant feeling or sensation in parts of their bodies when they lie down to sleep. Most people also have a very strong urge to move, and moving sometimes makes them feel better. But all this movement makes it hard or impossible to get enough sleep.

Restless legs syndrome usually affects the legs. But it can cause unpleasant feelings in the arms, torso, or even a phantom limb (the part of a limb that has been amputated).

When you don't get enough sleep, you may start to have problems getting things done during the day because you're so tired. You may also be sleepy or have trouble concentrating. So it's important to see your doctor and get help to manage your symptoms.

### What causes restless legs syndrome?

Usually there isn't a clear reason for restless legs. The problem often runs in families. Sometimes there is a clear cause, like not getting enough iron. If that's the case, treating the cause may solve the problem.

Women sometimes get restless legs while they are pregnant.

Other problems that are sometimes linked to restless legs syndrome include kidney failure, [rheumatoid arthritis](#), [diabetes](#), nerve damage, anemia, and [Parkinson's disease](#). But most people who seek treatment do not have any of these other problems.

### What are the symptoms?

Restless legs syndrome makes you feel like you must move a part of your body, usually your legs. These feelings are often described as tingling, "pins and needles," prickling, pulling, or crawling.

Moving will usually make you feel better, at least for a short time. This problem usually happens at night when you are trying to relax or go to sleep.

After you fall asleep, your legs or arms may begin to jerk or move. These movements are called periodic limb movements. They can wake you from sleep, which adds to your being

overtired. Although periodic limb movement is considered a separate condition, it often happens to people who have restless legs syndrome.

## **How is restless legs syndrome diagnosed?**

One of the hardest things about having restless legs syndrome is getting to the diagnosis. Often doctors don't ask about sleep or don't ask about the symptoms of restless legs. If you're not sleeping well, or if you think you may have restless legs syndrome, tell your doctor.

Your doctor will talk with you about your symptoms to make sure that the feelings you describe are typical of restless legs syndrome and are not caused by some other problem.

You may have blood tests to rule out other problems that could be causing your symptoms. In some cases, the doctor may order tests of your nerves to be sure there is no nerve damage. Your doctor may also order a sleep study called a [polysomnography](#). This test records how often your legs jerk or move while you sleep.

## **How is it treated?**

If your symptoms are mild, a few lifestyle changes may be enough to control your symptoms. Some changes that may help:

- Avoid tobacco, alcohol, and caffeine.
- Keep your bedroom cool, quiet, and comfortable, and use it only for sleeping, not for watching TV.
- Get regular exercise.
- Massage the leg or the arm, or use heat or ice packs.

When symptoms are more severe, medicines may help control the urge to move and help you sleep. There are different types of medicine, and you may have to try a few to find the one that works best.

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