

Restless Leg Syndrome May Result from Unhealthy Habits

Restless Leg Syndrome

"Do you have unpleasant feelings in your legs (e.g. creepy-crawly or tingly feelings) when you lie down at night that make you feel restless and keep you from getting a good night's sleep?" This was the question asked of 1803 subjects in a recent survey done by the Centers for Disease Control to determine the prevalence of Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS). RLS is defined by the following criteria: 1) the desire to move the limbs, usually associated with abnormal sensations; 2) symptoms worse or present only at rest with at least partial relief at with activity; 3) symptoms worse in the evening or during the night. So how common is RLS? This is a difficult question to answer since the diagnosis must be made based on symptoms only; there is no test that is diagnostic. And most people probably have some of these symptoms occasionally. This particular survey found that 9.4% of the respondents had symptoms "often" or "very often." This corresponds with other surveys in Canada and Germany that reported an incidence of about 10%. More importantly this survey found that RLS symptoms are associated with lifestyle: there was a strong association with sedentary lifestyle or lack of physical activity, cigarette smoking, obesity, and mental health problems. Add this to the already known fact that caffeine, alcohol and certain antidepressants worsen RLS and a somewhat clear picture develops: unhealthy habits can contribute to RLS. I didn't say that unhealthy habits cause RLS. There is also thought to be an association between diabetes, kidney failure and iron deficiency and RLS. And symptoms much like RLS can occur with Parkinson's disease, neuropathy (damaged nerves), psychiatric illness and from certain medications. And some people have RLS symptoms despite leading an active healthy life. However, RLS in many sufferers seems to be a lifestyle issue. Can it be treated? A number of medications have been tried, and some are very helpful in certain individuals with RLS. The commonest and one of the most successful is a Parkinson's medication called levodopa (Sinemet). Other Parkinson's medications have been used, as have opioid pain medications, anticonvulsant (anti-epilepsy) medications, tranquilizers, and even some heart medications (beta blockers.) If you are one of the 10% or so who have RLS, try changing your lifestyle. Stop smoking, lose weight or get more exercise. Cutting back on caffeine or alcohol may also help. If this isn't helpful and restless legs are significantly affecting your sleep see your health care provider for evaluation and advice as to what else can be done. More information is available by visiting the RLS Foundation's website at www.rls.org