



**KEYS TO  
A LONG LIFE**

## **Just the Facts: Restless Legs Syndrome**

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### **What is Restless Legs Syndrome?**

Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS) is a motor (movement) disorder that causes unpleasant feelings in the legs. People with RLS describe deep aching or burning, “creepy crawly” feelings, or pulling, itching, and/or jittery feelings. These feelings cause a strong urge to move or shift around to get some relief.

RLS is usually worse when a person is at rest—sitting in a dialysis chair, or trying to sleep at night. RLS can make people cut their dialysis time short, so they don’t get enough treatment. It can also keep sufferers from falling asleep, or wake them up. People with RLS are often very sleepy during the day because they do not get enough sleep at night.

### **Who gets RLS?**

Doctors are not sure what causes RLS. About 25% to 40% of people on dialysis have it. People who have a close family member with RLS are more likely to get it. Being over 50 raises the chance of having RLS. People under 20 also get it; RLS may be mistaken for “growing pains” in younger persons.



Besides kidney disease, RLS has also been linked to low blood iron levels, *anemia* (low red blood cell count), pregnancy, some types of arthritis, vitamin deficiency, inadequate dialysis, and the use of alcohol, caffeine, and tobacco.

### **What can I do if I think I have RLS?**

First, know that RLS is a real medical problem that can be treated—it is not just in your head. Second, there is no test for RLS; it is diagnosed by your doctor after hearing the symptoms. So, write down your symptoms. What do they feel like? When do they happen? What makes them better or worse? Finally, ask your doctor about it.

It will help your doctor if you learn the difference between RLS and painful *peripheral neuropathy* (nerve damage to the arms and legs). Neuropathy also occurs often in kidney patients, but is not worse at night and is not made better by movement.

### **How is RLS treated?**

One treatment for RLS is making sure your blood levels of iron and red cells are high enough—ask your doctor. Eating balanced meals, taking a multiple vitamin approved by your doctor, and stopping caffeine, alcohol, and smoking can relieve RLS. Getting enough dialysis can help, too.

Massage or hot or cold baths help some people. Mild exercise—like walking or stretching—can help, but too much exercise and fatigue can make RLS worse. A kidney transplant helps some people. Prescription medication can also help.

## How can I reduce my symptoms of Restless Legs Syndrome?

Problem	How can I prevent it?	What should I ask?
I feel very jittery and toss in bed all night.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid coffee or alcohol.</li> <li>• Make sure you get enough dialysis.</li> <li>• Get a little exercise in the early afternoon so you're ready to sleep at night.</li> <li>• Try a hot or cold bath or a leg rub and see if it helps soothe you.</li> <li>• Do meditation or try quiet, calming music to help you relax.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can I learn to relax and get my mind off my feelings of restlessness?</li> <li>• Should I be dialyzing longer to relieve my restless legs symptoms?</li> </ul>
I'm so tired I always want to take a daytime nap.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't give in! Try to go to bed and get up at the same time to train your body into a regular sleep pattern. (Use caution while driving or operating machines.)</li> <li>• Use your bed only for sleep—not TV or reading.</li> <li>• Make sure your bedroom is cool, quiet, and inviting.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What other things could be making me tired during the day—<i>anemia?</i> Diet? Lack of exercise?</li> </ul>
I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'll go crazy if I can't get some sleep!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk to your doctor about medications that can help.</li> <li>• Contact the RLS foundation (below) for more information.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you prescribe a medicine to help relieve my Restless Legs Syndrome?</li> </ul>

## Where can I find more information about Restless Legs Syndrome?

- The RLS Foundation – Write to 819 Second Street SW, Rochester, MN 55902, or visit their website at: [www.rls.org](http://www.rls.org)
- The National Center on Sleep Disorders Research – Write to 2 Rockledge Centre, Suite 7024, 6701 Rockledge Drive, MSC 7920, Bethesda, MD 20892-7920, or call (301)435-0199.
- *Facts about Restless Legs Syndrome* – 4-page article, 1 copy free. Write to the NHLBI Information Center, P.O. Box 30105, Bethesda, MD 20824-0105, call (301)592-8573, or download it from the web at: [www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/sleep/rls.htm](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/sleep/rls.htm)

