Restless legs syndrome and Parkinson’s

Some people with Parkinson’s experience restless legs syndrome. This factsheet explains what restless legs syndrome is, what the symptoms are, how it is diagnosed and what treatments are available.

WHAT IS RESTLESS LEGS SYNDROME?
Restless legs syndrome is a condition that causes an overwhelming urge to move your legs.

It is experienced by more women than men in the general population and can be a common problem for people who have Parkinson’s. Symptoms can start at any age, but it is more common as you get older.

Most people’s symptoms are not severe or frequent enough to need medical treatment. When it happens can vary from person to person. Some people experience it occasionally, while for others it happens every day. It happens most often when you are resting— for example, when you are sitting watching the TV or lying in bed.

WHAT CAUSES RESTLESS LEGS SYNDROME?
In most cases, the underlying cause for restless legs syndrome is not known. This is called idiopathic (or primary) restless legs syndrome.

You are more likely to have idiopathic restless legs syndrome if people in your family have had the condition.

People with Parkinson’s have secondary restless legs syndrome – this means there is an underlying cause for the condition. Secondary restless legs syndrome is also linked to pregnancy, iron deficiency and chronic kidney failure. If you are concerned about any of these, speak to your GP, neurologist or Parkinson’s Community Educator.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?
Symptoms include tingling, burning, itching or throbbing in your legs. People have described it as feeling like you have bugs crawling under your skin, or that it feels like you have fizzy water in your veins. Others describe the symptoms as a creeping, pulling, tugging or gnawing at the legs. You may need to walk around to get relief. Contact with bedclothes may also feel uncomfortable.

The symptoms of restless legs syndrome generally occur, or get worse, in the evening or at night, so the condition can have a major effect on your sleeping pattern. This lack of sleep can cause daytime tiredness and sleepiness. People with restless legs syndrome are also more likely to experience anxiety and depression.

Some medications, smoking, caffeine, alcohol, being overweight, and a lack of exercise may make symptoms worse.
HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?

If you are experiencing symptoms, you should talk to your Community Educator and make an appointment to see your GP. Your doctor can refer you to a specialist if necessary. Before your appointment, you may find it useful to keep a diary of your symptoms.

To assess your symptoms, your doctor may ask you the following:

- How often do your symptoms occur?
- How uncomfortable are your symptoms?
- Do your symptoms cause you distress?
- Is your sleep being disrupted?
- Do you have a family history of restless legs syndrome?

There isn’t a single test to diagnose restless legs syndrome, but there are some basic things your doctor will look for, including:

- An overwhelming urge to move your legs, along with feelings of itching or tingling
- Symptoms that happen or get worse when you are resting, especially while sitting or lying down
- Symptoms that get better when you move or rub your legs
- Symptoms that tend to occur or get worse in the evening or at night

Your doctor may also consider:

- Whether you find that your symptoms improve when you take your Parkinson’s medication

- If you experience periodic limb movements of sleep. This condition causes involuntary arm and leg movements while you are sleeping, but may cause you to wake up briefly. It tends to disrupt the sleep of the sleeping partner more than the person with Parkinson’s.

- How the condition develops. Restless legs syndrome is normally ongoing, but sometimes symptoms may only happen from time to time.

- Your age when diagnosed. Most people are middle-aged or older, but symptoms can start at any age.

- Symptoms such as numbness and tingling, or a burning or shooting pain in your hands or feet. This could be a sign of damage to your nervous system, which could be a sign of another condition such as peripheral neuropathy.

- Disturbed sleep, usually insomnia. Insomnia is a sleep disorder that causes problems getting to sleep or staying asleep.

- Depending on your medical history, you may be sent for further tests to rule out other underlying conditions. Sleep tests may be recommended if your sleep is very disrupted. These can help diagnose periodic limb movements of sleep.

IS IT DIFFICULT TO MAKE A DIAGNOSIS IN PEOPLE WITH PARKINSON’S?

Because there isn’t a specific test for restless legs syndrome, it can be difficult to diagnose the condition. Symptoms can be brief or only happen from time to time. Also, the condition can cause discomfort at night time and this can be mistaken for arthritis in people with Parkinson’s.

HOW IS RESTLESS LEGS SYNDROME TREATED?

Your treatment will depend on how severe your symptoms are and what may be causing them.

LIFESTYLE CHANGES

Mild symptoms of restless legs syndrome may be treated with lifestyle changes. There are a number of things you can try, such as:

- Massaging your legs
- Walking and stretching
- Applying a hot or cold compress to your legs
- Relaxation exercises – yoga or Tai Chi, for example

You might also find the following helpful:

- Taking a hot bath in the evening
- Avoiding alcohol, caffeine and smoking at night
- Establishing a regular sleeping pattern
- Having a cool, comfortable sleeping environment

MEDICATION

Moderate to very severe symptoms are normally treated with medication.

Levodopa is a chemical building-block that your body converts into dopamine. Levodopa occurs naturally and taking it as a drug treatment boosts the supply. It may be recommended if you only have symptoms now and again.

Dopamine agonists are usually prescribed if you are having more frequent symptoms. Dopamine agonists act like dopamine to stimulate your nerve cells.

Painkillers like codeine can be prescribed if you are in pain. Your doctor may also recommend anticonvulsant drugs to relieve symptoms.

Sleeping pills may be helpful if your symptoms flare up. Usually you will be prescribed a low dose for a short period of time only. In general, prescription sleeping tablets are safe and effective when taken as prescribed. However, speak to your healthcare professional if you have any concerns.

Sources: parkinsons.org.uk  |  www.rls-uk.org

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