

# What is Restless Legs Syndrome?

People with **Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS)** experience an uncomfortable sensation in their legs, associated with an urge to move. The sensation can be hard to describe, but people often use the following terms:

“Creepy crawly”  
“Heebee Jeebees”  
“Electricity in the veins”  
“Aching”  
“Growing Pains”  
“Coca Cola in the legs”  
“Nervous legs”  
“Itching”  
“Like I have to move”

The sensation usually comes on at night, and can interfere with sleep. It typically starts in the calves and affects both legs. Occasionally, other parts of the body such as the arms or even trunk may be involved. The sensation improves with movement, and sometimes people have to get out of bed and walk around.

## Who Gets RLS?

Studies indicate that 5 to 15% of people have RLS. Women are 2 to 3 times more likely than men to be affected. Symptoms can begin at virtually any age, although the average age of onset is in the late twenties and early thirties.

## What Causes RLS?

The precise cause of RLS is unknown. There is evidence that RLS is related to a deficiency of a brain chemical called dopamine. One of the strongest pieces of evidence for this theory is that patients often experience a dramatic improvement in their symptoms when they receive a dopamine replacement drug. Of note, it is known that the brain needs iron to make its own dopamine. As a result, people without enough iron in their bodies are more likely to have RLS.

## Is RLS bad? What if I just leave it alone and live with it?

For some patients, RLS symptoms may occur only occasionally, and may disappear spontaneously, while others may experience a progressive worsening of their symptoms over years. Occasional symptoms of RLS may not require treatment, but RLS should be treated if the symptoms frequently interfere with sleep. Most people can fall asleep within 30 minutes of turning the lights out, but more than two thirds of people with RLS are unable to do so. Some people with RLS cannot fall asleep for hours, because their leg symptoms are so bothersome.

## My legs twitch during the night.

My partner is bothered by them but I don't remember them. What is this? Legs “twitching” in the middle of the night maybe something called **Periodic Limb Movement Disorder**. Many people will have periodic limb movements in sleep, whereby the legs will twitch for up to a few seconds, every 5 to 90 seconds, though sometimes these movements can appear random.

## Are Periodic Limb Movements related to RLS?

Yes. Up to 80% of patients with RLS will also have periodic limb movements in sleep, however, only a minority of people with periodic limb movements, perhaps 20%, have RLS. The same things that worsen RLS will worsen periodic limb movements. The underlying cause is thought to be similar, if not identical. Treatment of both conditions is also similar.