



Iron deficiency might play role in jittery legs

Do you have trouble relaxing in the evening or sleeping at night because of leg discomfort that is often difficult to describe? You may have a condition called restless legs syndrome.

Restless legs syndrome, or RLS, was named in the mid-1940s by Swedish neurologist Karl Ekbom. This condition generally affects the nerves and leg muscles, causing uncomfortable leg sensations deep inside the muscles of one or both legs. It is most common in the evening or at night when a person is sitting or lying down, and brings about an irresistible urge to move the legs.

Symptoms of RLS vary from person to person in both severity and duration. They can disrupt sleep and make a person overly tired during the day. RLS also tends to occur when a person is forced inactive for long periods of time, such as during a long trip or when sitting through a movie.

Question: How is restless leg syndrome diagnosed?

Answer: These four symptoms must be present for the condition to be considered RLS:

» A frequent desire to move the legs is caused by uncomfortable sensations between the knee and ankle described as creeping, crawling, tingling, burning, itching or aching. This sensation can occasionally occur in the feet, thighs, arms or hands.

» These symptoms occur at rest and are relieved when a person moves.

» RLS results in a sensation of jittery legs or muscle restlessness.

» Symptoms get worse at night.

Q: What is the prevalence of RLS in the United States?

A: It is estimated that 12 million Americans have RLS, with 1 in 10 adults having a hard time sleeping because of the condition. It can occur at any age, however, and sometimes affects children.

Q: What are the causes?

A: No cause has been clearly established; a number of dietary and drug factors are being considered as possible triggers.

Iron deficiency could be a factor, at least in some people. In fact, one of the first symptoms of iron deficiency is sometimes RLS.

Also, deficiencies in folic acid,

vitamin B12 and magnesium might trigger RLS. Consumption of various foods -- including alcoholic beverages and caffeine-containing foods -- has been linked to RLS, but there is only limited published research on this. Nicotine might aggravate the condition.

Q: Can a change in diet help?

A: Before making major changes in diet, those with RLS should have their iron status evaluated through blood tests. If iron status is low, iron supplements and consumption of good food sources of iron would be recommended. Also, consuming a wide variety of foods and taking a multiple vitamin/mineral supplement can help provide other nutrients that could make a difference.

For more information, visit the Restless Legs Syndrome Foundation at www.rls.org and ask your physician about treatment options.

Alan Titchenal, Ph.D, CNS and Joannie Dobbs, Ph.D, CNS
are nutritionists in the Department of Human Nutrition, Food and Animal Sciences,
College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, UH-Manoa.
Dr. Dobbs also works with the University Health Service.
