

Opiate Withdrawal and Restless Leg Syndrome

Patient Education Module

What is Restless Leg Syndrome (RLS)?

RLS is a neurological condition that causes overwhelming urges to move the legs. It is a serious cause of chronic insomnia and it affects more than 7 million Americans.

Symptoms and Features of RLS include:

- Irresistible urges to move the legs. Legs feel creepy-crawly.
- Symptoms typically get worse as you lay at rest and worsen as your rest deepens and lengthens.
- Symptoms go away when you move your legs – but only for so long as you continue to move.
- Symptoms cause significant sleep disruption and affect energy levels and mood. ¹

There are two kinds of RLS:

1. Idiopathic – primary condition without a known cause.
2. Secondary – caused by another medication or condition. RLS is frequently a symptom of opiate withdrawal.

Some people describe insomnia-provoking RLS as the most unbearable of the *opiate withdrawal symptoms*. Your legs will calm naturally as your dopamine system recovers with abstinence, but in the meantime, here are a few ideas for minimizing the discomfort of this miserable symptom.

Medication Options for Opiate Withdrawal RLS

Because opiate withdrawal RLS tends to dissipate within a period of days or weeks, your doctor may be reluctant to prescribe the serious medications typically recommended for RLS, such as dopamine agonist Parkinson's medications. However, some medications that are commonly prescribed to treat opiate withdrawal symptoms can also help to reduce the severity of RLS.

Clonidine: Some people find that clonidine reduces RLS severity. Clonidine is a hypertension medication that's very commonly prescribed to reduce the anxiety, agitation, muscle aches, sweating, runny nose, and cramping of opiate withdrawal.

Natural Ways to Cope with Restless Leg Syndrome

As described above, medication therapies are not very widely utilized, and it is recommended that patients first try other coping strategies to alleviate the symptoms of RLS. These lifestyle changes and at-home remedies may help:

- Change the temperature: This will require some experimentation to see what works for you. Some people with RLS report that taking hot baths helps them, while others prefer cold showers. Similarly, ice packs or heating pads have been known to help.
- Getting daily exercise: This has been said to significantly relieve symptoms, but not with intense exercise close to bedtime. Instead, moderate aerobic exercises are best.
- Doing calf stretches before bed. Some people find that deep stretches provide hours of symptoms relief.
- *Lying on your stomach on the floor* for half an hour
- *Massage*: Massaging the legs, especially just before bed, can be helpful.

- *Applying pressure on the legs:* Whether with Ace bandages, a heavy blanket, hot or cold compresses, or compression stockings. Many people find that applying pressure to the legs before bed and while sleeping is helpful.

Avoiding Common RLS Triggers

Although clearly your *opiate withdrawal* is causing the problem, to play it safe, you may also want to **avoid** these other common RLS triggers:

- Caffeine
- Alcohol
- Nicotine
- Vigorous exercise (though moderate exercises is beneficial)
- Excessive stress
- Excessive refined sugar intake
- Antihistamines, such as Actifed, Sudafed and Benadryl. Though these first generation antihistamines are commonly recommended as OTC sleep aids, they can worsen RLS symptoms.

Good Sleep Habits will Improve RLS Symptoms

You probably don't need to worry about your sleep habits if experiencing RLS during the acute phase of a cold-turkey withdrawal – but if you get regular or even occasional RLS during a prorogued opiate taper, then you may want to pay more attention to good sleep hygiene. For the best odds of a restful night's sleep:

- *Maintain a cool, quiet and comfortable sleeping environment.* Take special care to limit screen glow.
- *Limit outside noise.*
- Make your bed an inviting place with *clean sheets and blankets.*
- Go to bed at the same time every night.
- Get up at the same time every morning.
- Try to give yourself enough sleeping time to *get fully rested.*
- Get enough *daily exercise* (but don't exercise too close to bedtime.)