

Depression and RLS

A Guide to Help You Control and Manage Your RLS

Studies show that depressive disorders are common in adults living with RLS. For RLS there is 2-4 times the risk of significant depression, compared to adults without RLS.¹ It is not clear why this is, but sleep disturbance due to RLS is a likely contributing factor. The first step in combating this health issue is to assess the severity of the depression-related symptoms and to consider whether poor sleep might be a major factor. Treating the sleep disorder, before treating depression, can be beneficial, especially when depression-related symptoms are mild. Patients with moderate to severe depression are more likely to need antidepressant medication, and their treatment is more complicated.¹

How to Know When Depression is Present

Five or more of the following symptoms, lasting two weeks or more, must be present for a diagnosis of major depression (those listed in italics are particularly sensitive to disturbed sleep):

- Depressed mood
- Diminished interests
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Thoughts of death
- Weight gain or loss
- *Insomnia or excessive sleepiness*
- *Fatigue or loss of energy*
- *Diminished concentration*
- *Mental/physical sluggishness or agitation*

In some cases, effective treatment of RLS will result in a significant improvement in depression.^{2,3} In other situations, treatment with antidepressant medications will be needed. When a patient has RLS and depression, treatment can involve a delicate balancing act, as some of the most effective and widely used antidepressants (such as Prozac or Zoloft) can worsen RLS feelings or the associated periodic limb movements in sleep (PLMS).^{1,4} A more complete list of antidepressants that can worsen your RLS is available from the RLS Foundation. Interestingly, the antidepressant bupropion (Wellbutrin) has been found to have neutral to beneficial effects on RLS and PLMS, with some of the older antidepressants having neutral effects (such as nortriptyline, doxepin, or trazodone).



Depression & Aging

Feeling blue is not a normal part of aging, yet surveys show over 58% of older adults think it is. Depression can be triggered by chronic illnesses such as RLS. Older adults often go untreated because they do not tell their healthcare provider about symptoms present.

Living with RLS & Depression

It is important to know when to ask for help. Depression combined with lack of sleep can be very serious. While dealing with chronic illness can sometimes seem fruitless, there are some helpful and effective strategies for staying ahead of your depression symptoms:

Talk: Being open about your feelings can reduce the stress you feel about your circumstances. Support Groups, family, clergy, and/or friends are just some of the options available.

The National Institute of Mental Health cites the following as symptoms of depression:

- Persistent sad, anxious or "empty" feelings
- Feelings of hopelessness and/or pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness and/or helplessness
- Irritability, restlessness
- Loss of interest in activities/hobbies once pleasurable
- Fatigue and decreased energy
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering details, making decisions
- Overeating or appetite loss
- Thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts

Get Involved: What better way to renew your sense of worth than by being proactive. Begin a new hobby, volunteer, join a social club, become an active advocate for RLS. You have a lot to offer!

Improve Your Health: We can all strive to exercise a little more and eat a little better. The results will impact all aspects of your life.

Learn: Read subjects important to you, attend classes, study new topics and theories. Engaging your mind may help your RLS symptoms subside as well as curb negative thinking.

Create: Many of those living with RLS have found inner creative talents while awake through the night.

Laugh: It may sound like the last thing you feel like doing, but is important to keep your sense of humor. Try not to let circumstances make you too serious. Laughter may not be the best medicine, but think of it as combination therapy – it will only help!

Remember to seek a professional opinion if you feel overwhelmed or troubled. There are counselors, clergymen, and psychologists near you who can be of assistance. There are also community organizations created solely to support your mental needs even when you do not have insurance. It is thought that depression affects nearly 6 million individuals, yet only about 10% ever ask for help.

Summary

Depressive disorders occur commonly with RLS. Awareness, lifestyle modifications, and in some cases, medical treatment, are important considerations.

You have a treatable medical illness. There are resources available to you in every community including doctors, community agencies, clergy, and counseling centers. Always remember to include all of your symptoms at your doctor visit.

The RLS Foundation does not endorse or sponsor any products or services. This publication has been reviewed and approved by our Medical Advisory Board. Laypeople are warned against making any changes in their treatment based on this information without consulting their healthcare provider.

¹ Hornyak M. Depressive disorders in restless legs syndrome: epidemiology, pathophysiology and management. *CNS Drugs* 24(2), 89-98, 2010.

² Hornyak M, Benes H, Kohnen R, Banik N, Schoen S, Bergmann L. Ropinirole improves depressive symptoms and core RLS symptoms in patients with moderate to severe idiopathic RLS: a multicentre, randomised, placebo-controlled study in Germany. *European Journal of Neurology* 16, 517, 2009.

³ Montagna P, Hornyak M, Ulfberg J, Hong SB, Koester J, Crespi G, Albrecht S. Randomized trial of pramipexole for patients with restless legs syndrome (RLS) and RLS-related impairment of mood. *Sleep Medicine*, 2010.

⁴ Rottach KG, Schaner BM, Kirch MH, Zivotofsky AZ, Teufel LM, Gallwitz T, Messer T. Restless legs syndrome as side effect of second generation antidepressants. *J Psychiatr Res* 43(1), 70-5, 2008.



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The Restless Legs Syndrome Foundation is dedicated to improving the lives of the men, women, and children who live with this often devastating disease. The organization's goals are to increase awareness of restless legs syndrome (RLS), to improve treatments, and, through research, to find a cure.