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Patient information: Restless legs syndrome (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is restless legs syndrome? — Restless legs syndrome (RLS) is a condition that causes strange sensations in your legs. If you have restless legs syndrome, you probably have the urge to kick or move your legs at night. This can wake you up or make it hard to sleep.

In some cases, RLS happens on its own and seems to be passed on in families. In other cases, the condition seems to be linked to other medical problems. For instance, a condition called “anemia,” in which there is too little iron in the blood, seems to increase the risk of RLS. Other conditions that increase the risk of RLS include kidney disease, diabetes, and multiple sclerosis. Pregnancy seems to increase a woman's risk of developing RLS, too.

What are the symptoms of RLS? — People who have RLS get an uncomfortable feeling in their legs when they are at rest. They describe this feeling as crawling, creeping, pulling, or itching. And they say the feeling is deep in the legs—not on the skin—usually below the knees. These symptoms usually get worse as the day moves on, and they are worst at night. But people can make the feeling go away temporarily if they kick or move their legs. Some people with RLS find that their legs move on their own while they are asleep.

In short, the symptoms:

- Happen when you are at rest
- Go away if you move your legs on purpose
- Are worst at night
- Sometimes include the legs moving on their own during sleep

Together, the symptoms of RLS can make it hard to get a good night's sleep. People with the condition often feel tired during the day.

Is there a test for RLS? — There is a test, but it is not usually necessary. Your doctor or nurse should be able to tell if you have it by asking about your symptoms and doing an exam. Still, it is possible that your doctor or nurse will decide to send you for a “sleep study,” to be sure of what is happening.

For a sleep study, you spend the night in a lab, and you are hooked up to different machines that monitor your movements, heart rate, breathing, and other body functions.

Is there anything I can do on my own to feel better? — Yes. You might feel better if you:

- Do activities that keep your mind alert during the day, such as crossword puzzles.
- Avoid caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol. These things seem to make RLS worse.
- Stretch your legs at night before you go to sleep ([picture 1](#)).

Should I see a doctor or nurse? — See your doctor or nurse if your condition bothers you, or if it keeps you from getting a good night's sleep.

How is RLS treated? — Some people with RLS do not need treatment because they have mild symptoms that don't bother them very often. If treatment is needed, there are several medicines doctors can suggest. Examples include iron supplements, [pramipexole](#) (brand name: Mirapex®), [ropinirole](#) (brand name: Requip®), and [carbidopa/levodopa](#) (brand name: Sinemet®).

What if I am pregnant? — If you are pregnant, you can take iron supplements and try the other tips that do not involve taking prescription medicines. Most of the medicines used to treat RLS are not safe to take during

pregnancy. If your symptoms are bad, there are some medicines that might be OK to take. But keep in mind that the condition usually goes away toward the end of pregnancy.

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Last literature review version 19.2: May 2011

This topic last updated: April 12, 2011

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GRAPHICS

How to stretch the backs of your legs



Stand facing the wall, feet together, about 2 feet from the wall. With your heels firmly on the floor and your shoulders, hips, and knees lined up straight, lean forward into the wall. This should stretch the backs of your legs. Hold this position for 10 to 30 seconds. Repeat 5 times each session, at least twice a day.