

Trouble Staying Fully Charged? Learn About Periodic Limb Movement Sleep Disorder

Are you one of those folks who throw the covers off the bed at night? Is your bed a wreck in the morning and do you feel like you didn't get any sleep? Or, maybe someone has told you that your arms and legs jerk around the bed when you are asleep? If you answered yes to any of these questions you may be experiencing symptoms of a sleep disorder called Periodic Limb Movement, or PLM.

What is PLM?

PLM causes repetitive movement of your limbs while you are asleep. These movements may occur as frequently as every 20 to 40 seconds, and may take the form of twitching or jerking movements or upward flexing of the feet. The movements can often cluster into episodes and these can last anywhere from several minutes to several hours, all the while disturbing your ability to sleep. PLM is a relatively common sleep disorder affecting about 4 - 11% of us, and it becomes more prevalent with age.



PLM movements may be mild jerks or twitches just in the ankles or toes all the way up to wild and repeated flailing of the arms or legs. Interestingly, PLM movements occur only during Non-Rapid Eye Movement sleep stages, and therefore occur mostly during the first portion of the night. The causes of PLM are not well known but some activities have been shown to be associated with PLM, such as shift work that affects your nighttime sleep routines, drinking coffee and stress.

Symptoms of PLM

If you have PLM you may experience one or more of the symptoms on this checklist:

- I have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep
- I experience uncomfortable feelings in my calves, thighs or arms
- I experience involuntary jerking or kicking movements of my legs or arms during sleep
- I have repeated brief awakenings during sleep
- I have excessive sleepiness during the day time

Consequences to Health, Wellbeing and Safety

If you are struggling with PLM you will have reduced quantity and quality of sleep every night. This can cause you to have a sleep debt and fatigue, which has been shown to reduce alertness and mental performance. Long term health consequences of PLM are related to long-term accumulated sleep debt, and include increased risks of diabetes, heart disease and stroke and depression.



PLM affects your ability to be fully charged during your daytime routine. You may experience very low energy levels or have difficulty staying alert, especially at times when demands for your mental attention wane. This can become a safety issue when driving, or when working with dangerous equipment or in hazardous situations.

Diagnosis and Treatment Options

If you suspect that you may be experiencing PLM then you should speak to your primary care physician or a sleep specialist. They will work with you to determine if you are indeed suffering from PLM. You may be asked to keep a sleep log, which is a simple diary of how much sleep you get each night, how well you slept, or fill out a detailed survey about all aspects of your sleep patterns and your personal health and medical history. Formal diagnosis of PLM can be accomplished through an overnight sleep study where a sleep specialist can monitor you for involuntary body movements and arousals during sleep. The results of this sleep study will be integrated with your sleep diary and questionnaire information to help establish a formal diagnosis.

Treatment options include medications that have been proven effective in treating other movement disorders, or in some cases sleep aids may be used to prevent arousals during nocturnal limb movements. Avoiding alcohol and caffeine may also help alleviate the symptoms and/or severity of PLM.

Seeking Treatment and Additional Information

If you think you may be suffering from PLM and it is affecting your ability to have energy and be alert during your daytime activities, contact your primary care physician and explain your situation. Be prepared to share thoughts about your sleep patterns, how you feel during the day, and any current medical or other issues you may be experiencing with your doctor. PLM doesn't have to ruin your sleep. By taking action you can calm your nights, improve your sleep and get back to living life fully charged.

For more detailed additional information on PLM, refer to the following web resources:

National Sleep Foundation – Information on PLM:

<http://sleepfoundation.org/sleep-disorders-problems/sleep-related-movement-disorders/periodic-limb-movement-disorder>

Harvard Sleep Education Program – An Overview of Sleep Disorders:

<http://healthysleep.med.harvard.edu/healthy/getting/treatment/an-overview-of-sleep-disorders>