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Periodic Limb Movement Disorder

What is Periodic Limb Movement Disorder?

Periodic Limb Movement Disorder (PLMD), also called *nocturnal myoclonus*, is a disorder that affects a person's ability to sleep at night and function normally during the day. The movements of PLMD occur most often when a person is asleep and are involuntary (that is, not consciously controlled). People with periodic limb movements are often not aware of these movements, although they may occasionally notice the involuntary movements of PLMD while they are awake.

Periodic limb movements usually occur in the legs but can also occasionally affect the arms. As the name implies, the movements occur at periodic (regular) intervals, usually every 30 seconds. They typically consist of a rhythmic extension of the big toe, together with an upward bending of the ankle, knee, or hip. The movements usually do not occur continuously throughout the night, but instead cluster in the first half of the night, during a phase of sleep called non-REM.

When leg movements occur five or more times during each hour of sleep, they are considered serious enough to represent PLMD. Periodic Limb Movement Disorder may result in various complaints about sleep. One patient may have particular difficulty falling asleep, while another may have trouble staying asleep.

Periodic limb movements can cause several other problems, some of which affect the bed partner and some of which affect the patient. A bed partner may complain of being kicked during the night, or that the bed covers are twisted or knocked off the bed. A patient may complain that frequent leg movements are wearing the hair off the legs.

Periodic limb movements are not the same as hypnotic jerks (night muscle spasms), the occasional jerks of the body that can occur just when a person is falling asleep. These jerks are normal and do not cause a problem with nighttime sleep or daytime alertness.

How is Periodic Limb Movement Disorder Treated?

- ❖ First, determine whether underlying causes (such as anemia, diabetes, arthritis, lung disease, or the use of antidepressant medications) are contributing.
- ❖ Health care providers may prescribe medication for the treatment of RLS.
- ❖ Many with PLMD need no treatment at all because they sleep through the limb movements and are not disturbed by excessive daytime sleepiness or other symptoms.