



Restless leg syndrome

Restless leg syndrome, often referred to as RLS, is characterized by unpleasant sensations in the legs, leading to an uncontrollable urge to move when at rest in an effort to relieve these feelings.

RLS sensations, known as *dysaesthesiae* (unpleasant abnormal sensations) in medicalese, have been described as creeping, tugging, tingling, burning, or even like insects crawling inside the legs (referred to as 'formication'). Sensations range in severity from mildly uncomfortable to irritating to downright infuriating, the most curious aspect of which is that attempting to relax brings on the symptoms—which of course prevents relaxation.

Consequently, most RLS sufferers have difficulty falling asleep and staying asleep. This leads to exhaustion, which affects personal relations, job, memory, concentration and many other aspects of daily life.

Although RLS is probably underdiagnosed, or misdiagnosed, it is known (from medical aid society records) to affect 5 per cent of the population in the European Union and the United States. The incidence is thought to be slightly higher in women, but that could simply be another example of underreporting, because some men find the condition just too ridiculous to report. Older people seem to experience symptoms for longer periods of time and also more frequently.

The orthodox medical community doesn't have much to offer the sufferer of RLS in the way of comfort. The US National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke states on its website that the cause of RLS is unknown and that there isn't a single diagnostic test for it. It recommends decreasing your intake of caffeine, alcohol and tobacco, and maintaining a regular programme of moderate exercise. Orthodox medications that are prescribed for RLS include dopaminergics, benzodiazepines, opioids and anticonvulsants, although, at best, these are only sometimes moderately effective, and only for as long as you take them.

Nevertheless, alternative medicine provides a number of proven options that successfully treat this puzzling syndrome.

Homeopathy

Back in 1958 a doctor by the name of John Robertson Raeside undertook a very successful six-month double-blind proving of *Hydrophis cyanocinctus* (the venom of the highly poisonous Indian Ocean sea-snake) on 10 healthy probands (all medical practitioners, by the way). That proving showed the remedy to be indicated for 'the syndrome of paresis of the lower limbs' (*Allgemeine Homoeopathische Zeitung*, 1961; 206: 114-15). I use this homoeopathic medicine successfully for RLS in a 6CH potency, alongside the osteopathic manipulative therapy described immediately below.

Osteopathy

One study found that the so-called Dalrymple pump (a pedal lymphatic pump technique) can increase venous and lymphatic return in the legs by mobilizing tissues, thereby decreasing metabolic waste build-up. The use of this technique in RLS should really undergo further study as it is an easy-to-perform non-pharmacological intervention which has been shown to double sleep-time and to remove the symptoms of RLS (M. V Ragucci et al. Fortieth Annual Am Ost Ass Research Conference Abstracts: 1996).

In the Dalrymple pump technique, the patient lies on his back with the osteopathic physician standing at his feet. The osteopath grasps the patient's feet and dorsiflexes them with enough force to produce hyperdorsiflexion of the feet. The osteopath should continue applying the force so he affects the longitudinal axis of the patient's body. The force will send a wave of motion toward the head, followed by a rebound wave moving toward the feet. The osteopath will use the umbilicus, a dermal lesion or some other body landmark, to monitor that wave motion.

As the rebound wave returns to the feet, the osteopath re-applies the same dorsiflexion force, thereby creating an oscillatory pump. This technique may also be combined by the osteopath with the application of force through the plantarflexed feet, thereby stretching the anterior body-wall's fascial structures. For a complete description, with photographic illustrations, of the Dalrymple pump technique see American Osteopathic Association (Bureau of Research), Foundations for Osteopathic Medicine, Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott, Williams & Wilkins, 1997: 956-958). This treatment can be followed by frequent cool showers, regular swimming and yoga.

Nutritional medicine

Elderly people who complain of restless legs in bed at night may benefit from iron supplements, but their condition will first need to be investigated for the underlying cause of any iron depletion (Bartram, Thomas, *Bartram's Encyclopaedia of Herbal Medicine*, London: Robinson Publishing Limited, 1998: 370).

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