## Treating restless legs syndrome

Mild cases of restless legs syndrome that are not linked to an underlying health condition may not require any treatment, other than making a few lifestyle changes.

**These include:**



- Adopting good sleep habits (for example, following a regular bedtime ritual, sleeping regular hours, and avoiding alcohol and caffeine late at night).
- Quitting smoking if you smoke.
- Exercising regularly during the daytime.

**During an episode of restless legs syndrome, the following measures may help relieve your symptoms:**

- Massaging your legs.
- Taking a warm bath in the evening.
- Applying a warm or cold compress to your leg muscles.
- Relaxation exercises, such as yoga or Tai Chi.
- Walking and stretching.

If your symptoms are more severe, seek advice from your GP or practice nurse.

Your GP can arrange a blood test which may identify iron deficiency anaemia as the cause of your restless legs syndrome, and this can be corrected with iron supplements once the cause of iron deficiency has been identified.

If no treatable cause can be found, the symptoms can sometimes get worse with time and severely affect the person's life.

Restless legs syndrome is not life threatening, but severe cases can disrupt sleep (causing insomnia) and trigger anxiety and depression.

The charity Restless Leg Syndrome UK (rls-uk.org) provides information and support for people affected by restless legs syndrome.

Obtain advice from your GP or Practice nurse regarding exercise.

## Examples of moderate activity include:

- Walking
- Dancing
- Pushing a lawn mower
- Doubles tennis
- Activities that improve strength, balance and flexibility twice per week, such as:
  - Sitting to standing
  - Yoga/Pilates/Tai Chi
  - Carrying shopping bags
  - Working with resistance bands
  - Reducing time spent sitting or lying down and breaking up long periods of inactivity with some movement.

## If you have any concerns please contact:

Hospital .....

Outpatients .....

Clinical nurse specialist .....

GP Surgery .....

To find out whether you have a Leg Club near you, or for any further information about Leg Clubs or the Leg Club model, email **lynn.bullock@legclubfoundation.com** or visit **www.legclub.org**

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# Restless Leg Syndrome

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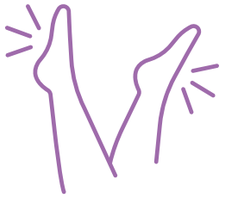
## What are restless legs?

Restless legs syndrome, also known as Willis-Ekbom disease, is a common condition of the nervous system that causes an overwhelming irresistible urge to move the legs. It affects anyone at any point in their life, but women are twice as likely to develop restless legs syndrome as men. It is also more common in middle age, although the symptoms can develop at any age, including childhood.



## Symptoms of restless legs syndrome

The main symptom of restless legs syndrome is an overwhelming urge to move your legs.

It can also cause an unpleasant crawling or creeping sensation in the feet, calves, and thighs. It has been described as:

- Tingling, burning, itching, or throbbing.
- A "creepy-crawly" feeling.
- Feeling like fizzy water is inside the blood vessels in the legs.
- A painful cramping sensation in the legs, particularly in the calves

The sensation is often worse in the evening or at night. Occasionally, the arms are affected, too.

Restless legs syndrome is also associated with involuntary jerking of the legs and arms, known as periodic limb movements in sleep (PLMS).

Some people have the symptoms of restless legs syndrome occasionally, while others have them every day.

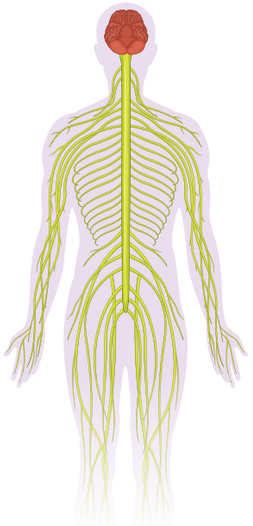
The symptoms can vary from mild to severe. In severe cases, restless legs syndrome can be very distressing and disrupt a person's daily activities.

## What causes restless legs syndrome?

In many cases, there is no obvious cause of restless legs syndrome.

This is known as idiopathic or primary restless legs syndrome, and it can run in families.

Some neurologists (specialists in treating conditions that affect the nervous system) believe the symptoms of restless legs syndrome may have something to do with how the body handles a chemical called dopamine.



Dopamine is involved in controlling muscle movement and may be responsible for the involuntary leg movements associated with restless legs syndrome.

In some cases, restless legs syndrome is caused by an underlying health condition, such as iron deficiency anaemia or kidney failure. This is known as secondary restless legs syndrome.

There is also a link between restless legs syndrome and pregnancy. About 1 in 5 pregnant women will experience symptoms in the last 3 months of their pregnancy, although it is not clear exactly why this is. In such cases, restless legs syndrome usually disappears after the woman has given birth.

**Other possible triggers include:**

- Excessive smoking, caffeine or alcohol
- Being overweight or obese
- Stress
- Lack of exercise

## Diagnosing restless leg syndrome

There is no single test for diagnosing restless legs syndrome.

A diagnosis will be based on your symptoms, medical and family history, a physical examination, and test results.

Your healthcare professional should be able to diagnose restless legs syndrome, but they may refer you to a neurologist if there is any uncertainty.

Keeping a sleep and symptom diary may help your Healthcare professional in assessment.