



# Triggers for Restless Legs Syndrome

Restless legs syndrome (RLS) is a sensorimotor condition that can interfere with sleep as well as rest-related waking activities. Various treatments can help control RLS symptoms, but there is no cure.

While the exact cause of RLS is unknown, the disease is believed to have a genetic basis; recent research has shown that RLS runs in families. It is also thought that RLS is related to a problem with dopamine, a brain chemical that is released by nerves and has many functions. When decreased in the brain, dopamine may cause movement problems such as in Parkinson's disease.\*

Due to lower dopamine levels at night, RLS symptoms may worsen during evening hours. Further, research has shown that RLS brains have low stores of iron, which is important to dopamine production. The role of iron may also help explain why disease severity varies from mild to severe among people who have RLS, and why symptoms may vary in one person over time.

Before considering drug therapy, people with RLS can try managing symptoms through nondrug strategies. One of these strategies is to identify and avoid factors that may trigger or exacerbate RLS symptoms.

## Common RLS Triggers

- Caffeine has been linked to an increase in RLS symptoms. Caffeine is present in coffee, tea, chocolate, soda and many other common food and beverages.
- Nicotine in any form has been anecdotally linked to an increase in RLS symptoms.
- While studies have not been conducted on alcohol consumption and RLS, many people find that consuming alcohol, especially in the evening hours, leads to an increase in RLS symptoms.
- While mild to moderate exercise may help relieve RLS, vigorous exercise can trigger symptoms for some people.
- Many people have identified stress and anxiety as triggers for RLS symptoms.
- Some individuals find that limiting their refined sugar intake during the day helps to reduce evening bouts of RLS.
- Many prescription and over-the-counter medications tend to increase RLS symptoms.
- Antihistamines (used to treat colds, allergies and insomnia) block dopamine receptors in the brain and may trigger RLS symptoms. Actifed, Benadryl, Robitussin, and Sudafed (unless labeled nondrowsy) are commonly used and sometimes culprits of RLS symptoms. Several second-generation antihistamines may not affect RLS symptoms; these include Allegra Clarinex and Claritin/Alavert.
- Antinausea drugs, like antihistamines, also block the brain's dopamine receptors, increasing RLS symptoms. These drugs include Compazine, Dramamine, Phenergan and Reglan. Alternative drugs that are less apt to worsen RLS symptoms include Zofran for nausea and Transderm Scop for motion sickness.
- Many antidepressants such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs, like Cymbalta, Effexor, Paxil, Prozac, Serzone and Zoloft) and tricyclic medications (Elavil, Tofranil and others) have been linked to a worsening of RLS. Alternatives include Wellbutrin, Norpramin (desipramine) and Desyrel (trazodone). Response to any of these medications may vary from one person to another. It is important to consult with a physician on how they may impact RLS symptoms.

\* Dopamine has many functions, and its association with movement problem is best understood in Parkinson's disease. The role of dopamine in RLS is still somewhat controversial, despite circumstantial evidence.

## Identifying Your RLS Triggers

Knowing what makes RLS worse for you can be helpful in controlling your RLS. Otherwise, RLS may control you.

The RLS Foundation has developed a sleep diary for keeping a record of daily symptoms alongside activities and factors such as exercise, stress level and intake of substances like caffeine. Keeping the diary for five to seven days can help you identify triggers for your RLS symptoms. With guidance from your healthcare provider, you can then eliminate or change these factors and monitor how this affects your symptoms.

It is important to share with your healthcare provider a list of all prescription and over-the-counter medications that you take, and any concerns you may have about them. Some of your medications may be triggers for your RLS. If you experience an increase in RLS while on any medication, contact your provider to discuss the possibility of decreasing the dosage or even discontinuing the medication. Do not discontinue any long-term prescription medication without consulting your physician.

For a copy of the sleep diary, visit [www.rls.org](http://www.rls.org) or contact the RLS Foundation at [info@rls.org](mailto:info@rls.org) or 512-366-9109.

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*The RLS Foundation is dedicated to improving the lives of the men, women and children who live with this often devastating disease. Our mission is to increase awareness, improve treatments and, through research, find a cure for restless legs syndrome.*

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