



Lane Regional  
Medical Center

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# **GUIDE TO SLEEP DISORDERS: 4 COMMON TYPES AND TREATMENTS**



When we drift off to sleep, the body remains hard at work, going through four stages of sleep: N1, N2, N3 and REM. As we slip into the deepest states of sleep, N3 and REM, breathing slows and the amount of blood to muscle tissue increases, promoting repair and growth. Meanwhile, our energy is being restored and essential hormones are being released. This cycle continues for roughly 90 minutes before beginning again. However, when a sleep disorder interferes with these cycles, heart health, brain health, energy, mood, productivity, and more can all suffer negative consequences.



Across the nation, as many as 70 million Americans are believed to have some form of a sleep disorder. In this guide, we will review four of the most common forms. We will explore their symptoms, complications, and most effective treatment options to help sufferers restore a healthy sleep cycle.

# SLEEP APNEA

## What is it?

Sleep apnea is a condition in which the sufferer experiences episodes of paused breathing throughout the sleep cycle. These pauses can last for 10 seconds or more and can occur multiple times each hour. As a result, oxygen levels in the blood drop and the brain rouses the sleeper to wake briefly and take in more air. In many cases, the patient is completely unaware that this brief state of wakefulness has occurred. Although, this cycle of interrupted sleep will certainly have an impact on them during the daytime hours.

## What are the Symptoms?

Sleep apnea often goes on for years before being diagnosed. In most cases, it is a partner who first recognizes signs such as gasping or snoring. Additionally, there are typically symptoms occurring throughout the day that are later connected to the condition. These may include:

- *Morning headaches*
- *Dry mouth*
- *Fatigue throughout the day*
- *Irritability*
- *Inattentiveness*
- *Weight gain*

## How is it Diagnosed and Treated?

In order to reach a definitive diagnosis of sleep apnea, a patient will need to undergo a sleep study where their brain activity, breathing, heartrate, and blood oxygen levels are monitored over the course of a full night's sleep.

Treatment of sleep apnea will depend on the patient and the specific form of the condition. In some cases, lifestyle changes such as losing weight or quitting smoking sufficiently address the condition. Others may need to begin using a continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) machine, which uses air pressure to keep the airways open during sleep. Custom-fitted mouth pieces may also help. If these treatment options still do not provide relief, surgery may be needed to open the nasal passages.





## NARCOLEPSY

### What is it?

Narcolepsy can be characterized as both a sleep and neurological disorder. Sufferers fall asleep unexpectedly and may experience excessive drowsiness throughout the day. A mutation on the 12th chromosome is responsible for the condition, and episodes are believed to be triggered by a combination of chemical imbalances in the brain and environmental stressors.

### What are the symptoms?

In addition to sudden attacks of sleep and fatigue, there are many other signs which may accompany narcolepsy. These may include:

- Temporary loss of muscle tone – Narcolepsy may be accompanied by a condition called cataplexy in which some, or even most, muscles experience weakness. Episodes can last up to several minutes.
- Sleep paralysis
- Quickly transitioning to REM – For most people, REM sleep is the last stage in a 90 minute sleep cycle. However, those with narcolepsy may enter REM within 15 minutes of falling asleep.
- Hallucinations – These can occur either while a patient is falling asleep (hypnagogic) or as they are waking up (hypnopompic).

### How is it Diagnosed and Treated?

Narcolepsy is not typically immediately identified. For most, the symptoms arise slowly over a period of years, most often between the ages of 15 and 25. A definitive diagnosis can be reached through a sleep study which often consists of two parts:

- Polysomnogram – In this overnight test, a patient's breathing, muscle tone, brain waves, and eye movements are monitored.
- Multiple Sleep Latency Test (MSLT)– Following the overnight polysomnogram, patients may undergo a MSLT in which multiple 20 minute naps are spaced two hours apart. During these naps, the same factors are monitored and measured.

Unfortunately, there is no known cure for narcolepsy. However, there are treatment methods available which may alleviate symptoms. These may include lifestyle changes such as quitting smoking and drinking, maintaining a healthy diet, and getting regular exercise. Additionally, prescription medications including stimulants and REM treatments may prove useful.

# RESTLESS LEG SYNDROME

## What is it?

Restless legs syndrome (RLS) is a condition in which sufferers experience an uncomfortable feeling in their legs and an irresistible urge to move them. In most cases, these symptoms appear in the evening hours while sitting or lying in bed. The condition can begin at any age and tends to worsen over time.

## What are the symptoms?

Feeling a temporary discomfort in the legs is one matter, but when these feelings happen consistently and follow a pattern, there is a strong likelihood that RLS is involved. Most notably, patients tend to experience the following:

- Discomfort that worsens with rest – For most patients, the sensations associated with RLS are predictably worse after extended periods of sitting or lying down.
- Discomfort that is improved by movement
- Symptoms that worsen at night
- Periodic limb movement of sleep – This associated condition causes twitching and kicking of the legs which may continue throughout the night.

## How is it Diagnosed and Treated?

A diagnosis of RLS is often reached through a thorough exam with a physician in which medical history and a description of the symptoms are given. They may also conduct a complete physical and neurological exam, including blood work. In some cases, a sleep study may be recommended.

Once a diagnosis has been reached, a physician can make treatment recommendations to help alleviate symptoms. These may include lifestyle recommendations such as massage, warm baths, exercise, and reducing or eliminating caffeine. Prescription medications may also be able to help. These may include dopamine promoters, calcium channel blockers, muscle relaxers, opioids, or sleep aids.





## INSOMNIA

### What is it?

Insomnia is the inability to fall or stay asleep. It can impact anyone and ranges widely in severity. Some may only experience occasional bouts of insomnia, whereas others may have episodes that last for months or even years. Insomnia can be either primary or secondary. Primary insomnia is isolated and is not the result of any other medical condition or medication. Secondary insomnia, on the other hand, can result from a mental or physical health condition or as a side effect of medication.

### What are the symptoms?

In addition to struggling to fall asleep or to waking throughout the night, insomnia can lead to additional signs and symptoms. These often include:

- Feeling tired during the day
- Inability to focus
- Irritability
- Depression or anxiety
- Making simple mistakes or errors due to lack of sleep

### How is it Diagnosed and Treated?

In order to diagnose insomnia, a physician may conduct a physical exam, review current sleep habits, and conduct a sleep study. These can help determine if the underlying cause of insomnia is related to a separate sleep disorder such as sleep apnea or RLS.



For some patients, changes to their bedtime routine can help alleviate the symptoms of insomnia, including keeping a relaxing bedroom environment, limiting caffeine later in the day, avoiding electronics before bed, and maintaining a regular sleep routine. For others, therapy, melatonin, or relaxation techniques may be beneficial. In the event that these therapies do not help or an underlying condition is identified, additional treatments including prescription medication may be needed.

Our bodies run on sleep, and when we get too little or poor quality sleep, the effects can soon be felt. If you are struggling with a potential sleep disorder, the solution may be simpler than you believe. Contact the Lane Sleep Study Center to learn more about our team, facility, and treatment options.



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