

NARCOLEPSY

Narcolepsy is a chronic sleep disorder, characterized by excessive sleepiness and sleep attacks at inappropriate times, such as while at school or at work. Narcolepsy affects more than 1 in 2,000 Americans, and most cases go undiagnosed and untreated.

Narcolepsy is a neurological sleep disorder. It is not caused by mental illness or psychological problems. It might be caused by genetic mutations and abnormalities that affect the brain, combined with an environmental such as a viral infection that triggers during the brain's development.

The four most common symptoms are **excessive daytime sleepiness**, **cataplexy** (a sudden muscular weakness brought on by strong emotions), **sleep paralysis** (a feeling of being paralyzed, including being unable to talk or move for a brief period, either when falling asleep or after awakening), and **hypnagogic hallucinations** (vivid, dream-like experiences that are difficult to distinguish from reality, occurring when falling asleep or after awakening).

Other symptoms include lethargy, low motivation, inability to concentrate, and memory loss. Narcoleptics often have problems in school, at work and with keeping up with friends, coworkers and family.

Narcoleptics, when falling asleep, generally experience the REM stage of sleep (dream stage) within 5 minutes; whereas in a normal individual REM stage is attained 90 minutes after falling asleep.

Overnight sleep study, followed by a daytime sleep study called Multiple Sleep Latency Test (MSLT) and Epworth Sleepiness Scale are the three most commonly used tests to diagnose Narcolepsy.

Narcolepsy cannot be cured, but its symptoms can usually be controlled so that the individual can lead a normal life. The treatment plan involves medication, life-style changes, and education.

- Medications are prescribed to control the excessive daytime sleepiness and cataplexy. Caffeine should be avoided in the late afternoon and evening, so that nighttime sleep is not disturbed.
- Lifestyle changes like a strict sleep-wake schedule, taking short naps once or twice each day, as needed, avoiding activities that can be dangerous, such as driving, swimming, or cooking, except during times when one knows that they will be alert will help
- Education. Narcolepsy can be a devastating disorder if family, friends, employers and teachers do not understand it, so education is essential. Daytime sleepiness may be mistaken for laziness, boredom, or lack of ability. The experiences of cataplexy and dreaming during wakefulness may be wrongly seen as a psychiatric problem. For students' small adjustments in the classroom, such as being seated in the front of the class and being chosen to run classroom errands, can make a tremendous difference in one's academic performance.