

Restless Leg Syndrome: An Ayurvedic and Personal Perspective

Restless leg syndrome is a neurological condition that is characterized by an uncontrollable desire to move the legs while resting or trying to fall asleep. The condition has no known cause and no known cure and often gets worse as a person ages. It is also not known how many people suffer from the condition though most Medical Doctors report having seen between 1-10 cases. As the condition has been receiving recent publicity, more patients can be expected to report symptoms to their doctors and practitioners.

The sensations reported vary from burning sensations to insects crawling on the leg and can vary from irritating to painful and may be mild or severe. The most important symptom is an uncontrollable desire to move the legs while falling asleep. Those suffering from the condition are often prescribed central nervous system depressant drugs in the opiate class as well as dopamine agonists (supporters) such as L-dopa, the drug commonly used for Parkinson's disease. Most patients are sent to see a neurologist, some are sent to sleep specialists and others to psychiatrists.

Many people who know my story of self-healing know that in 1997 I was crippled with an autoimmune disorder that affected many systems of my body. After healing from the acute crippling aspects of the condition, I suffered from Chronic Fatigue Syndrome for the next 8 years. What many people don't know is that during this period I developed a wide range of secondary symptoms including severe insomnia, allergies and Restless Leg Syndrome among others.

While I have, for the most part healed from the illness that crippled my body, I do still suffer from some occasional odd symptoms. One of those is Restless Leg Syndrome (RLS).

My experience of RLS is like this. I lay down at night and I feel an energy build up in my solar plexus. The energy travels from my solar plexus to my left leg most often. I feel the discomfort mostly in my leg and not in my solar plexus. But, during a particularly bad episode, my solar plexus become agitated as well. The energy begs me to move and impacts my breathing. At first, I shook my leg a lot but that did not help. I then found that if I stuck the ankle of the opposite leg under and into the thigh muscle while lying on my belly that the trigger point type massage I was giving my self alleviates some of the discomfort. When the condition was particularly bad, I found that putting pressure on my solar plexus also alleviated or interrupted the flow of energy and I felt a little better.

Still, the relief gained from contorting my body in bed was only minimal and temporary. For a long time the condition frustrated me. I did not know that it had a name. I just knew that it contributed to my insomnia and at times I feared going to bed. At times in the past, the condition could get so bad that I simply could not sleep. Sometimes, my insomnia kept me up till the early morning hours.

Eventually, I did learn one way of alleviating the symptom that would allow me to fall asleep. That method was through sexual release. I observed that sexual release allowed the energy building up in my solar plexus to flow down and out. Without the release, the energy remained trapped and agitated eventually traveling down to my legs. Sleep came easy. As you can imagine, sexual activity became a part of my falling to sleep ritual.

Of course, Ayurveda^[1] and Yoga teach that excessive sexual activity is not healthy. It depletes the shukra dhatu (sexual energy) and leads to low ojas (weak immune system). What's a yogi to do? I continued to observe the condition and found a few additional clues. First, I observed that the condition tended to come on if I stayed up later into the night. By going to bed before by 10:00 , more often than not, the experience would be less intense or would not occur at all. The next observation was that while sexual release decreased the symptom for the one night, the next night it was more likely to occur again. In other words, by engaging in sexual activity I actually made the condition worse over time. On the other hand, the discipline of abstinence while initially making the

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Published on CA College of Ayurveda (<http://www.ayurvedacollege.com>)

condition worse, dramatically improved the condition over time.

From an ayurvedic perspective, the pathology of the condition includes a disturbance of vata dosha in the majjavaha srota. Vata dosha is responsible for excessive motion and disturbances in the movement of prana. In my condition, it was clear from the agitation to the solar plexus that pitta also played an important role. Hence, it can be said that vata may be pushing pitta out of balance.

In considering treatment for the condition, the ayurvedic practitioner should consider a vata or vata-pitta pacifying program of diet, herbs and lifestyle. Herbs that may be beneficial are those with the following actions.

1. Nervine Sedatives: These help reduce the flow of prana through the nerves and nadi of the physical and subtle body. skull cap and jatamamsi are good examples of nervine sedatives.
2. Nervine Tonics: These herbs help to stabilize the flow of prana through the nerves and nadi of the physical and subtle body while improving the ability of the nervous system to manage stress. Ashwaganda and shankhapushpi are examples.
3. Rasayanas: These are herbs that restore the strength and endurance of the body. Many herbs are considered to be rasayanas including ashwaganda and amalaki.
4. Cool Dipanas: These herbs have a regulating action on agni and on the flow through the manipura chakra. Fennel, dill and aloe vera are examples.

Each patient has their own unique experience and each person's path toward healing is often equally unique. Below are additional suggestions on how to manage Restless Leg Syndrome. .These are based on both my own personal experience and my experience working with my patients.

1. The condition may improve if the patient goes to bed earlier, prior to the rise in pitta that naturally occurs after 10:00pm .
2. If the condition is active, consider having the patient get out of bed and perform yoga poses that work the thigh muscles and also those that flex and extend the solar plexus and pelvis. I have found that forward bends, backward bends and spinal twists are all beneficial as well as specific poses that contract the thighs such as the chair pose and the warrior pose series. I would not recommend any poses be performed in a manner that is too active. All poses should be performed very slowly with great attention to the body and breath.
3. Have the patient perform alternate nostril breathing before bed.
4. If your patient has found that sexual release alleviates the condition encourage a period of abstinence to build the shukra and the ojas.
5. Avoid the use of stimulants such as caffeine and nicotine
6. Avoid the use of white sugar

By living an Ayurvedic and Yogic lifestyle, the nervous system of the body becomes balanced and healthy. This type of lifestyle supports the healing of all disease. Through the proper use of the senses and by following the specific herbal and lifestyle suggestions above, I am confident that patients with Restless Leg Syndrome can recover and live and sleep normally. This is not to say that the journey is easy, it most certainly is not. We must always remember that even small changes toward harmony in our lifestyle can stimulate the healing process and make dramatic changes in our well being.

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