

# WHAT IS NARCOLEPSY?

## Quick Facts:

Narcolepsy is a chronic, lifelong neurologic disorder. The most common symptom is excessive sleepiness during the day. Narcolepsy involves a problem in the brain's signals. As a result, you may fall asleep when you should be awake during the day.

## KEY POINTS:

- **About 1 in 2,000 people in the U.S. have narcolepsy.**
- **Symptoms often begin to occur during the teenage years.**
- **People often have narcolepsy for many years before they get a diagnosis.**
- **Untreated narcolepsy can have a negative impact on your performance at school and at work.**
- **People with untreated narcolepsy are 10 times more likely to get into a car accident than those who receive treatment.**



## How Can I Learn More?

- Talk to your board-certified sleep medicine physician.
- Visit [www.sleepeducation.org](http://www.sleepeducation.org)

## Am I At Risk:

The vast majority of narcolepsy cases occur without any risk factors. Your risk of having narcolepsy is slightly higher if a family member also has it. Research suggests that a trigger may cause some cases of narcolepsy. Potential triggers include: **head injury, chronic sleep deprivation, viral illness and strep infection**

## GENERAL OVERVIEW:

Excessive daytime sleepiness is often the first symptom of narcolepsy to appear. This need to sleep during the day can be impossible to resist. In some cases, sleepiness occurs in sudden sleep "attacks." Other symptoms may include:

**Cataplexy** is a brief episode of muscle weakness. For example, you may feel your knees buckle. In some cases, it can cause you to collapse to the floor. Cataplexy is often triggered by strong emotions such as laughter. It tends to last from only a few seconds

up to a minute. It usually does not cause injury. Not all individuals with narcolepsy will have cataplexy.

**Hallucinations** may occur as you are falling asleep or waking up. These vivid, dream-like events seem real and may be frightening.

**Sleep paralysis** also occurs as you are falling asleep or waking up. It causes you to be unable to move even though you are awake and aware of the event. Sleep paralysis may occur at the same time as a hallucination.

**Disrupted nighttime sleep** may involve multiple brief awakenings during the night. Most people who have narcolepsy are able to fall back to sleep easily. Fragmented sleep is more common in people who have had narcolepsy for a long time.

Since narcolepsy is not a common sleep problem, many primary care physicians have difficulty diagnosing the sleep disorder. A board-certified sleep medicine physician can help make the proper diagnosis. Schedule an appointment with a sleep medicine physician at an AASM Accredited Sleep Disorders Center. He or she will perform a combination of the tests to help determine if you have narcolepsy, including: In-lab overnight sleep study, Multiple Sleep Latency Test (MSLT) or Hypocretin Level Measurement.

## TREATMENT:

There is no cure for narcolepsy, but treatment can help you manage its symptoms. Your sleep doctor may prescribe a stimulant to help you stay awake during the day. Your doctor may prescribe another drug to reduce episodes of cataplexy. Some lifestyle changes also can help.

## TIPS:

- Be careful to avoid driving while drowsy.
- Go to bed and wake up at the same times each day.
- Take brief, 15-to-20 minute naps during the day if they help you feel refreshed.
- Ask your doctor for help in managing school and work schedules.
- Take your prescribed medications at the scheduled time each day.

### ➔ Next Steps:

- Talk to your doctor about your symptoms. It may help to write down your symptoms including the time of day when they occur.
- Discuss all of your medications and herbal supplements with your doctor.
- Keep a daily and nightly log of your sleep habits. Share this information with your doctor.
- Your doctor may schedule you for a sleep study. Ask the sleep doctor if you should change any of your sleep habits or medications before the sleep study.



### Questions For Your Physician

Take a few minutes to write your questions for the next time you see your doctor.

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### Sample Questions:

Why do I feel tired all the time?

What is a CPAP machine and how can it help me?