



One in 2,000 people have narcolepsy. Narcolepsy is a sleep disorder defined by constant sleepiness and a tendency to sleep at inappropriate times. Typically, a person with narcolepsy suffers sleep attacks as well as continual sleepiness and a feeling of tiredness that is not completely relieved by any amount of sleep. If not recognized and appropriately managed, narcolepsy can drastically and negatively affect the quality of a person's life.

What are the Symptoms of Narcolepsy?

- **Excessive daytime sleepiness**
- **Cataplexy** – Sudden brief losses of muscle strength – is sometimes the first symptom of narcolepsy.
- **Sleep Paralysis** – Brief loss of muscle strength which occurs when a person is falling asleep or waking up.
- **Hypnagogic hallucinations** – Vivid dreams that occur when a person is drowsy.
- **Automatic behaviors** – Routine tasks performed by a person who is not aware of doing the activity.
- **Disturbed nighttime sleep** – People with narcolepsy often have trouble staying asleep at night.
- **Other symptoms** – People with narcolepsy also report symptoms of double vision, the inability to concentrate, memory loss, and headaches.

When to see a Healthcare Professional

The first step in diagnosing narcolepsy would be an evaluation by your Primary Care Physician or other healthcare professional to make sure that some other medical illness or medication is not the cause. The next step would be to see a sleep specialist. At a sleep disorders center, the specialist would thoroughly review your medical history and perform a complete physical examination. If the sleep specialist suspects narcolepsy a series of tests would be scheduled.

To perform the tests, you would spend the night at the sleep center in a comfortable and private room. During a polysomnogram (PSG) a series of electrodes are placed to record brain waves, muscle activity, heart rate, and eye movements, while other devices measure breathing. The procedure is painless and does not involve needles or any other invasive testing. This test will be followed by a daytime Mean Sleep Latency Test or (MSLT). With the electrodes still in place, you will be asked to take 5 20 minute naps at two hour intervals. The MSLT monitors how quickly you fall asleep when given the opportunity.

Behavior Treatment for Narcolepsy

- Follow a regular sleep/wake schedule. Go to bed and get up at approximately the same time each day.
- Regular short naps may be helpful since it is generally harder for people with narcolepsy to fall asleep within an hour or two after a nap
- Be cautious during activities that can be dangerous if you fall asleep or have an episode of cataplexy, such as driving or cooking.

Although narcolepsy cannot yet be cured, its symptoms can usually be controlled or improved so that sufferers experience symptoms less frequently. And lead fairly normal lives. Treatment plans would likely have several parts: medication, behavior treatment, and management of your environment.