Narcolepsy Quick Facts

Definition: Narcolepsy is a chronic neurological disorder in which the brain loses the ability to maintain normal sleep and wake states. Affects 1 in every 2,000 people (200,000 Americans, 3 million people worldwide).

Symptoms:
• Periods of extreme sleepiness during the day, comparable to staying awake for 48-72 hours straight.
• Cataplexy is a sudden loss of muscle tone, resulting in the inability to move. Emotions such as laughter or anger often trigger cataplexy.
• Hallucinations while falling asleep or waking that are often frightening.
• Sleep paralysis upon waking or falling asleep, during which an individual is awake but cannot move.
• Disrupted nighttime sleep.

Causes:
• There are two forms of narcolepsy: Narcolepsy with Cataplexy (N+C) and Narcolepsy without Cataplexy (N-C).
• In N+C, an autoimmune reaction destroys the brain’s hypocretin-producing cells. Hypocretin neurotransmitters are essential to properly regulate sleep and wakefulness.
• The cause(s) of N-C are not well understood.

Diagnosis:
• Many primary care doctors are unfamiliar with the basic symptoms of narcolepsy.
• Individuals experience symptoms for an average of 3 to 5 years before receiving an accurate diagnosis and 10 to 15 year delays are not uncommon.

Treatment:
• Narcolepsy is a chronic, lifelong condition. There is no cure for narcolepsy.
• Treatments can improve quality of life greatly.
• Leading FDA-approved medications are Provigil, Nuvigil and Xyrem. A variety of other medications are prescribed off-label as well.
• Many patients manage their narcolepsy with multiple medications and diligent personal attention to their health.

Living with Narcolepsy:
• Narcolepsy can cause serious disruptions to daily routine and compromise education, employment, and family opportunities.
• Narcolepsy’s affect upon quality of life is comparable to epilepsy and Parkinson’s disease.