

Narcolepsy Quick Facts

Definition: Narcolepsy is a neurological autoimmune sleep disorder in which the brain loses the ability to maintain normal sleep and wake states. Affects 1 in every 2,000 people (200,000-250,000 Americans, 3 million people worldwide).

Symptoms:

- Periods of extreme sleepiness during the day, comparable to how someone without narcolepsy would feel after staying awake for 48-72 hours straight.
- Cataplexy is a sudden loss of muscle tone while awake, resulting in the inability to move. Emotions, such as laughter or anger, will often bring on cataplexy. In severe cases, cataplexy may cause a person to collapse to ground and stay paralyzed for as long as several minutes.
- 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.

Causes:

- Narcolepsy is a nervous system disorder. Narcolepsy isn't related to seizure disorders, fainting, simple lack of sleep or other conditions that may cause abnormal sleep patterns.
- 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 70,000 hypocretin-producing cells. Hypocretin neurotransmitters are essential to proper regulation of 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 -5 years before receiving an accurate diagnosis and 10 -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 for narcolepsy: 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.
- Studies indicate narcolepsy's affect upon quality of life is comparable to epilepsy and Parkinson's disease.