Narcolepsy

Narcolepsy is a disabling neurological disorder of sleep regulation. It affects the control of sleep. It also affects the control of wakefulness. It is an interruption of the dreaming state of sleep. This state is known as REM or rapid eye movement sleep.

SYMPTOMS

The development, number, and severity of symptoms vary widely among people with the disorder. Symptoms generally begin between the ages of 15 and 30. The four classic symptoms of the disorder are:

- **Excessive daytime sleepiness**
- **Cataplexy.** This is sudden, brief episodes of muscle weakness or paralysis. It is caused by strong emotions. Common strong emotions are laughter, anger, surprise, or anticipation.
- **Sleep paralysis.** This is paralysis upon falling asleep or waking up.
- **Hallucinations.** These are vivid dream-like images that occur at when you first fall asleep.

Other symptoms include:

- **Unrelenting excessive sleepiness**. This is usually the first and most obvious symptom.
- **Sleep attacks**. Patients have strong sleep attacks throughout the day. These attacks can last for 30 seconds to more than 30 minutes. These happen no matter how much or how well the person slept the night before. These attacks end up making the person sleep at work and social events. The person can fall asleep while eating, talking, and driving. They also fall asleep at other out of place times.
- Disturbed nighttime sleep.
- Tossing and turning in bed.
- Leg jerks.
- Nightmares.
- Waking up often.

DIAGNOSIS (HOW TO TELL WHAT IS WRONG)

It's possible that genetics play a role in this disorder. Narcolepsy is not a rare disorder. It is often misdiagnosed. It is often diagnosed years after symptoms first appear. Early diagnosis and treatment are important. This help the physical and mental well-being of the patient.

TREATMENT

There is no cure for narcolepsy. The symptoms can be controlled with behavioral and medical therapy. The excessive daytime sleepiness may be treated with stimulant drugs. It may also be treated with the drug modafinil (Provigil). Cataplexy and other REM-sleep symptoms may be treated with antidepressant medications. Medications will reduce the symptoms. Medications will not ease symptoms entirely. Many available medications have side effects. Basic lifestyle changes may also reduce the symptoms. These changes include having regular sleep schedules and scheduled daytime naps. Other lifestyle changes include avoiding "over-stimulating" situations.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

Narcolepsy is a life-long condition. Most people with the disorder enjoy a near-normal lifestyle. Patients have a near-normal lifestyle with the help of medication and support from teachers, employers, and families. Narcolepsy can have a devastating impact if not properly diagnosed and treated. It can cause social, educational, psychological, and financial problems.

CURRENT RESEARCH

The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS) supports a wide range of clinical and basic research. The research includes studies on sleep disorders including narcolepsy. NINDS has notified researchers that it is looking for people to apply for grant money. Researcher can use this money in both clinical and basic sleep and wakefulness research. In 1999, a research team working with canine models identified a

gene that causes narcolepsy. This is a breakthrough that brings a cure within reach. The researchers are currently searching for faulty versions of this gene in people with narcolepsy.

Researchers are working hard to learn more about this problem.
Some of this information is provided by The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke.

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