



Can an Active Lifestyle Prevent or Treat RLS?

The short answer is: Yes!

First, research demonstrates an association between lifestyle and RLS. Regular exercisers are 3.3 times less likely to have RLS than non-exercisers. Second, for those individuals living with RLS, one study suggests¹ that regular exercise reduces severity of the symptoms by an average of 40%.

It certainly seems logical that our bodies are more still at night after a physically active day. However, the exact mechanisms for how exercise prevents or reduces severity of RLS remain unknown. Other interrelated lifestyle factors may contribute. In addition to being an increasingly inactive population, we're also increasingly sleep-deprived. Television, computer activities, and other electronic temptations increasingly delay our bedtime. Sleep restriction, in turn, reduces daytime physical activity – inadequate sleep makes us too tired to exercise. These observations reveal how unhealthy lifestyles initiate vicious cycles that cause or perpetuate diseases such as RLS. Sleep restriction promotes inactivity, which in turn contributes to RLS, which then further restricts sleep by causing insomnia, which further discourages activity and exercise... and so on.

What type of exercise best treats RLS?

This question of type and level of exercise remains to be addressed carefully, although logic and existing data advise benefit of exercise involving the legs. Clinical experience suggests that regularity of exercise is important. While many patients find that regular mild to moderate exercise helps their RLS symptoms, vigorous or extreme exercise often worsens RLS symptoms. One way to ensure regularity of exercise is to identify a variety of activities you enjoy. This prevents boredom with any one activity. Then, devote around 30 minutes of each day to one of your chosen activities. Make enjoyable physical activity a daily lifetime habit!

Some controversy exists concerning when to exercise – both for treatment of RLS and for sleep quality in general. It is probably best to avoid significant exercise within an hour or so of bedtime. On the other hand, some practitioners now prescribe mild to moderate evening activity up to an hour before bedtime* to help treat insomnia. We have not yet studied how time of day of exercise affects its treatment of RLS. The best way for you to find out is to do the experiment yourself: Does the time of day when exercise is performed have an effect on your RLS? Is morning or evening exercise better?

Unlike medications, the side-effects of regular exercise are all good. Use of daily, enjoyable physical activity to treat RLS offers many advantages over medications. Exercise provides adjunct treatment for several diseases commonly associated with RLS, including (for example) diabetes and depression. Regular activity is especially appropriate for the treatment of RLS in children due to the developmental benefits of exercise, in the elderly due to the improved quality of life offered by exercise, and in both groups due to the need to avoid or minimize medications. As always, patients should adhere to any activity limitations recommended by their caregivers.

People with RLS commonly offer complaints such as, “It’s as if my legs want to exercise after I lie down to go to sleep!” Their legs may be telling them that they didn’t get enough activity during the day. The good news is that regular enjoyable activity should help control their RLS symptoms, otherwise improve sleep quality, and offer myriad other health benefits. For more information, please visit exercisemedicine.org.

Exercise/Activity Guidelines

- Daily is best! Make 30-60 minutes of enjoyable, physical activity a daily lifetime habit.
- Emphasize activities involving the legs, including both aerobic and high-load (resistance) exercise.
- Avoid exercising to the point that muscles or joints ache or become painful as this will very likely make the RLS symptoms and your sleep worse. Exercise in moderation.
- Consider a variety of activities you enjoy. Variety prevents boredom with any single activity, however, some people prefer the routine and simplicity of a daily walk or run.
- Do not engage in any activity or workload that a doctor has told you to avoid.
- In addition to planned sessions, increase “incidental” activities such as taking the stairs, using easy-to-find, distant parking places, performing physical chores with force and energy, etc.
- If time or motivation are problems, keep things simple and convenient (i.e. home gym instead of health club). One commonly-employed strategy: watch television while you exercise.

- Determine for yourself when to exercise for optimal relief from RLS symptoms. However, avoid significant exertion within an hour or so of bedtime.
- Getting adequate sleep reduces the chance that sleep restriction may be contributing to your RLS, as well as ensures you have the energy to be physically active.

**Medical Editor's Note: It is inconclusive that exercise within a few hours before bedtime helps promote sleep. Most articles suggest exercise typically has the best benefit for sleep when done in the morning to early afternoon.*

¹ Exercise and restless legs syndrome: a randomized controlled trial. Aukerman MM, Aukerman D, Bayard M, Tudiver F, Thorp L, Bailey B. J Am Board Fam Med. 2006 Sep-Oct;19(5):487-93.

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The RLS Foundation is dedicated to improving the lives of the men, women, and children who live with this often devastating disease. Our mission is to increase awareness, improve treatments and, through research, find a cure for restless legs syndrome.

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