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Vail Valley Health & Wellness

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Restless legs syndrome can be treated



Special to the Daily Dr. Gordon Gibbs

Restless legs syndrome (RLS) affects up to 15 percent or more of the population. Diagnosis is established by four criteria set by the International Restless Legs Syndrome Study Group:

- A strong, often irresistible urge to move your legs, usually accompanied by uncomfortable sensations — described as crawling, creeping, cramping, tingling, pulling, tugging or itching.
- Symptoms start or get worse when at rest (sitting or lying down).

- Symptoms are partially or temporarily relieved by activity (walking or stretching).
 - Symptoms are worse at night.
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RLS is considered a disruptive neurologic disorder. Along with the symptoms listed above, it can cause intermittent movements while sleeping, which makes falling and staying asleep difficult. The strong urge to move the legs temporarily relieves the discomfort. Symptoms can be severe, causing chronic sleep deprivation with psychological and cognitive deficits.

The typical treatment for RLS involves long-term use of prescription medication, sometimes with unwanted side effects, increased costs and often with suboptimal effectiveness. However, there may be another cause often discussed or diagnosed — vein disease.

About 40 percent of people with RLS have problems with their veins. Vein disease is called chronic venous insufficiency (CVI) or venous reflux disease. Typically the one-way valves in affected individuals' leg veins become leaky, resulting in inefficient bloodflow from the legs back to the heart. In addition to RLS, people with vein disease also can have other leg symptoms, such as:

- Aching
- Heaviness
- Cramping
- Bulging veins
- Spider veins
- Darkening of the skin, ulcers and sores

While the exact mechanism for the relationship between restless legs syndrome and vein disease is not well understood, many doctors have discovered that treating the vein disease of people with RLS is extremely effective.

One study demonstrated that treatment of diseased veins initially eliminated or significantly reduced 98 percent of a person's restless leg symptoms. It also found that 92 percent of symptoms did not return after one year.

Another study showed that 95 percent of an individual's restless legs symptoms were reduced, and 53 percent of symptoms were completely eliminated after treatment of their diseased veins.

These study findings suggest that the evaluation of restless legs syndrome should include an evaluation for possible vein disease. As many as 40 percent of such people could have a single procedure to eliminate RLS symptoms without the risk or cost of life-long medications.

If you or someone you know has restless legs syndrome, consider having a screen for vein disease. Rocky Mountain Vein Institute offers free ultrasound screenings as well as free consultations with a board certified team of doctors and health care providers who specialize in the management of vein disease.

Dr. Gordon Gibbs is the founder and chief medical officer at the Rocky Mountain Vein Institute in Edwards and is a cooperative partner in the Vail Valley Health & Wellness Initiative. The Vail Valley Health & Wellness Initiative is led by the Vail Valley Partnership in conjunction with like-minded businesses, trade associations, consumer organizations and economic development organizations whose goal is to increase medical groups and meetings in the Vail Valley. Information about Rocky Mountain Vein Institute can be found at www.rmvein.com or by calling the Edwards clinic at 970-763-7600.