

Narcolepsy Need-to-Know Guide

Symptoms of narcolepsy

There are several symptoms associated with narcolepsy. However, not all sufferers from narcolepsy experience all of these.

The main symptoms are:

Excessive daytime sleepiness

This is the main symptom for almost all people with narcolepsy. People with narcolepsy feel sleepy a lot of the time, and at times at which sleep is not normally appropriate. The urge to sleep at these times is severe and irresistible. In some cases, sleep can occur in situations where they are active, for instance when you are driving, talking or eating.

Someone with narcolepsy has no control over the sleepiness that they feel, and they you can have sleep attacks in which they fall asleep with no warning. These attacks can occur several times a day, and may last from a few minutes to an hour.

When they wake up, a person with narcolepsy usually feels refreshed, but they can soon become sleepy again.

Cataplexy

Cataplexy does not occur in all people with narcolepsy, but it is one of the strongest indicators of narcolepsy in those people who do experience it.

Cataplexy is a sudden loss of strength and control in some muscles whilst a person is awake. This may result in slurred speech, a nodding or drooping head, knees giving way, or in extreme cases a sudden fall to the ground. Cataplexy is often triggered by strong emotions such as laughter or anger.

Cataplexy attacks usually last from a few seconds to a minute or so. A person experiencing cataplexy remains conscious and is fully aware of what is happening.

Sleep-related hallucinations

Many people with narcolepsy experience vivid dream-like hallucinations when they are falling asleep (hypnagogic hallucinations) or waking up (hypnopompic hallucinations). These can be frightening, especially for children.

Disturbed night-time sleep

Although people with narcolepsy generally need to sleep during the day, the overall amount of time that they are asleep is roughly the same as normal. This is because people with narcolepsy also experience disturbed, fragmented night-time sleep.

Sleep paralysis

Sometimes when a person with narcolepsy is waking up from sleep (and sometimes when they are falling to sleep), they find that they are unable to move, even though they are fully

conscious. This is called sleep paralysis. It usually only lasts for a minute or two and is not dangerous, though it may be disconcerting.

Automatic behaviour

When people with narcolepsy are tired and sleepy, they may carry out actions without thinking about them and often with no recollection of them afterwards. This is called automatic behaviour. For example, a student in school may appear to be writing diligently, but what they have written turns out to be entirely inappropriate. Such automatic behaviour can be dangerous if it takes place when the person is carrying out a hazardous activity such as driving.

Other symptoms

Sleepiness can also lead to problems with memory and the ability to concentrate. Some people with narcolepsy experience blurred or double vision. The part of the brain that does not function properly in people with narcolepsy is also believed to play a role in regulating appetite, and as a result people who develop narcolepsy often gain weight suddenly.

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