

REM Sleep Behaviour Disorder (RBD)

REM Sleep Behaviour Disorder (RBD) is a parasomnia characterized by the acting out of dreams that occurred during REM (rapid eye movement) sleep. This condition occurs in 0.5% of the population but is much more likely to occur in males over the age of 50.

We spend approximately one quarter of the night in REM sleep and it is during this period that we are most likely to experience vivid and emotional dreams. However REM is also accompanied by muscle atonia (loss of muscle tone) and this means we are normally motionless during dream sleep, apart from the muscles that control breathing within the diaphragm and eye movements. The part of the brain called the brainstem and in particular the pons is responsible for this muscle atonia.

Symptoms of RBD

In RBD there is loss of the normal muscle atonia (loss of muscle tone) which leads people free to act out their dreams. For example someone may dream that they are running and kick out in the bed or dream that they are fighting and either punch or strangle a bed partner. Shouting out is common and symptoms are more likely to occur in the second half of the night as this is when most REM sleep occurs. The condition is typically insidious in onset, often coming on over months or years but becoming more frequent and ending up with some patients having symptoms most nights of the week. Up to 70% of patients will injure themselves or their bed partner and they may well come to a doctor with a history of sleep related injury. Within RBD, the dreams themselves can be particularly aggressive with themes of being attacked or chased.

There is much ongoing research within RBD because up to 50% of patients who develop this condition will go on to develop neurological problems and in particular conditions such as Parkinson's Disease or Dementia with Lewy Bodies.

Treatment of RBD

There are many effective pharmacotherapies including medication such as clonazepam or melatonin, but it is also important to look at the bedroom environment to make the patient and the bed partner as safe as possible, e.g. the bed partner sleeping separately and moving hard or sharp objects away from the bed.

