

What is Narcolepsy?

Narcolepsy is a sleep disorder that typically starts in the mid teens and affects between 0.05 and 0.1% of the general population. It can be a **debilitating cause of daytime sleepiness**.

Symptoms of Narcolepsy

Narcolepsy is characterized by brief but often irresistible sleep attacks where the patient has an overwhelming urge to sleep and may **nap for 15 to 30 minutes**, but the naps can be refreshing for a short period. Patients commonly experience very **vivid dreams** that they may find hard to separate from reality and dreams can occur immediately upon falling asleep.

The other two symptoms that characterise narcolepsy are: **sleep paralysis** and **cataplexy**.

Sleep paralysis can occur on falling asleep or upon waking and can last for a minute or so. The patient is awake but unable to move at all, often with a feeling of breathlessness or associated dreamlike imagery.

Cataplexy is characterized by loss of strength with strong emotion, e.g. laughing with friends or family or getting angry. Typically the head will flop forward and the mouth will fall open. Sometimes the knees will buckle and cause someone to fall to the ground. Attacks of cataplexy can be brief lasting seconds or occasionally minutes when severe.

Not all patients with narcolepsy will have cataplexy.

It is also common for narcolepsy sufferers to have a fragmented night sleep and vivid dreams shortly after falling asleep.

Cause of Narcolepsy

At present most research would suggest that narcolepsy is an **autoimmune condition**, a disease where the body's immune system attacks its own cells. Most patients with narcolepsy have low levels of a **neuropeptide** (a type of brain chemical) called hypocretin within their brains. Hypocretin has an important role in regulating alertness and also appetite and metabolism. This helps to explain why some patients with narcolepsy find it harder to regulate their weight after they develop the condition. It is also likely that other **environmental factors** play a part in the development of narcolepsy as the age of onset is very variable and a number of people report potential **trigger factors such as stress, pregnancy and possibly vaccination**.

Treatment of Narcolepsy

Narcolepsy requires specialist investigation. The diagnosis can be made with an overnight sleep study (polysomnography) followed by a multiple sleep latency test within a sleep laboratory, alongside a typical history.

There are a number of medications that are very effective including stimulant drugs that increase alertness during the day, antidepressants which are very effective cataplexy treatments, as well as behavioural and lifestyle changes including scheduled brief power naps.

