

Department of Neurology
Regional Sleep Service

Isolated sleep paralysis

Sleep paralysis describes symptoms upon waking either in the middle of the night or towards the end of the night. People feel that they are fully conscious, however they cannot move arms and legs and typically cannot speak and this can be frightening. It is quite typical for dream like images or the feeling of a presence in the room to be part of the experience and although symptoms feel like they are lasting a long time typically the events last for 1-2 minutes. Some people also feel a pressure on the chest or short of breath.

We know that this condition is caused by coming abruptly out of dream (REM) sleep. During dream sleep there is a switch within the brainstem that stops us moving our muscles apart from the muscles that control eyes and breathing. When we awake abruptly, paralysis occurs when it takes a minute or so for the muscle switch to turn back on. It is common and at least 20% of the population have experienced sleep paralysis at least once in their lives. About 2-3% of people can have it frequently.

What make sleep paralysis worse?

We know that if people fall asleep deeply having had bad sleep or if they have any changes to their sleep schedules such as shift work then sleep paralysis may occur more often. Alcohol and other drugs that disrupt dream sleep close to the last hour of the night can also make sleep paralysis worse and some medications occasionally make dreams more vivid and can worsen the condition.

Important advice for anyone who gets sleep paralysis regularly is to try and keep bedtime and wake time fixed. Try to avoid a lot of alcohol or caffeine close to bedtime.

It is common for sleep paralysis to wax and wane over time. Sometimes daytime stresses can also make things worse. It is more common in younger people under the age of 30 and often symptoms settle with time alone and a clear understanding of the problem.

Typically sleep paralysis does not cause significant daytime sleepiness or other trouble during the day. If you have real trouble staying awake during the day and can't get through the day without napping or dozing then it is best to talk to your GP about a referral to a hospital sleep service.

Sometimes medication can be used to help with sleep paralysis if symptoms are severe and your GP or sleep specialist thinks that this is needed.