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Narcolepsy – The sleep attack

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Getting a good sleep is vital to our body. Nowadays, many of us are busy planning our day to day schedule but forgetting to sleep. And the result is we often encounter sleep disorders which can range from something as common as insomnia to the most rare like , REM sleep behaviour.

There is a wide range of sleep disorders that can adversely affect one's sleep patterns including inability to fall asleep and difficulty to stay awake. Disorders of sleep such as somnambulism, insomnia, jet lag, narcolepsy are highly prevalent in our society. Of these narcolepsy or day time sleep attack is getting more prominence with it's symptoms. Narcolepsy is characterized by excessive daytime sleepiness and abnormal REM sleep. These along with cataplexy (sudden loss of muscle control), sleep paralysis, hypnagogic hallucinations, automatic behaviour, night time weakness, disrupted nocturnal sleep and obesity form the symptoms of narcolepsy .

Narcoleptics or the patient's suffering from narcolepsy can experience day time sleepiness and sudden loss of muscle control often caused by strong emotions. Thus a person may fall asleep during normal activities such as working, cooking or even driving. The severity of sleepiness varies among individuals.

About 1 in 2000 people are reported to have been affected by this disorder. It occurs equally in both men and women. The symptoms start appearing from childhood or adolescence, but many people have symptoms for years before getting proper diagnosis.

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Although the exact cause of narcolepsy was not determined for many years after its discovery. But many cases of narcolepsy are caused by lack of the brain chemical hypocretin. Scientist had discovered conditions that are seemed to be associated with an increase in an individual's risk of having the disorder. Several variations in human leukocyte antigen (HLA) gene in chromosome 6 are thought to have strong relation with narcolepsy.

Narcolepsy affects almost every aspect of our life including physical well being and society, mental health, social and professional relationships, memory and attention. So it should be diagnosed using certain techniques along with the symptoms. These methods include nocturnal polysomnogram, spinal fluid analysis and multiple sleep latency test (MSLT).

People with narcolepsy cannot be cured completely, but the symptoms can be reduced. The main medications include CNS stimulants, sodium oxybate, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors and tricyclic antidepressants. Although no cure yet exists for narcolepsy. If your symptoms are particularly troublesome, you may be prescribed medication that can help to reduce day time sleepiness. A change in behavioural strategies such as maintaining a regular sleep schedule, avoiding alcohol, caffeine, smoking (at night), regular exercise and a warm bath before bed time could help to control the symptoms and enjoy many normal activities.

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