



What is Narcolepsy?

Narcolepsy is a chronic neurological disorder that causes excessive **sleepiness without warning** and at inappropriate times. When a person has Narcolepsy, the brain is unable to regulate the sleep-wake cycles normally. Numerous factors contribute to sleep disturbances and neurological dysfunction. As a result, both daytime and night-time sleep attacks occur.

During the day, people with narcolepsy can experience sleep attacks repeatedly. This causes them to **fall asleep suddenly and without warning**, while at night, their sleep is disturbed and they wake up frequently.

There are two main types of sleep: rapid eye movement (REM) sleep and non rapid eye movement (NREM) sleep. For people without sleep disorders, during REM, the body becomes immobile and conscious thinking 'paralysis' occurs.

Your eyes move quickly in different directions even though your eyelids are closed and intense dreaming occurs. When people fall asleep, they usually have NREM sleep first, followed by REM sleep. People suffering from narcolepsy **fall into REM before NREM sleep** and they may be either asleep or awake.

People who suffer from narcolepsy are a safety hazard to themselves and to others. It is hard to imagine what life must be for a narcoleptic, difficult, dangerous, embarrassing and definitely frustrating.

A narcoleptic will doze off in the train and miss his or her stop, fall asleep in the bathtub with potentially dangerous consequences, or have to be shaken awake by the dentist so that a dental procedure may occur. They **fall asleep while driving**, doing their jobs, socializing with friends and family, or even eating. People with Narcolepsy are often on the verge of unconsciousness.

Narcolepsy can occur in men, women, children and the elderly. Signs and **symptoms of narcolepsy usually develop during adolescence**, but can also appear in children as young as ten years old, as well as in adults. Sometimes narcolepsy can go undiagnosed for several years, and be mistakenly diagnosed as laziness, lack of sleep,

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[depression](#) or a seizure disorder.

Children suffering from narcolepsy are often thought to have some type of [learning disorder](#) or seizure disorder such as epilepsy. Their ability to study, focus and remember becomes severely affected. This leads to [depression](#), a decreased [immune response](#), [stress](#), poor work performance and interpersonal problems with teachers and their peers. Some children have even been misdiagnosed with [hyperactivity](#). When they are tired, they tend to do their work or activities in a hurry rather than slow down. If your **child displays symptoms of narcolepsy**, it is best that they receive medical care immediately.

Although narcolepsy is a lifelong condition, symptoms will improve with ongoing treatment so that people are able to lead more productive lives.

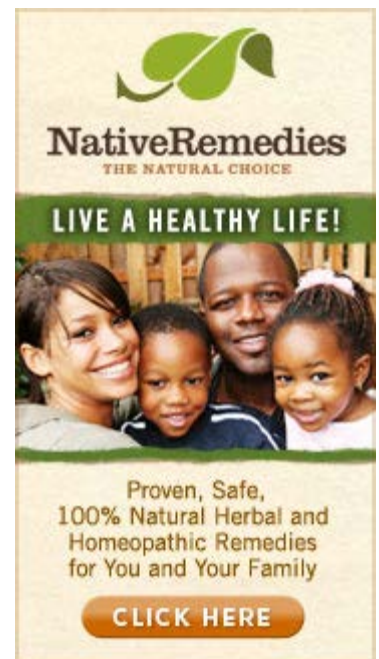
Diagnosing Narcolepsy

A diagnosis of narcolepsy is based on the patient's symptoms, physical exam and family history of narcolepsy. The doctor may refer the patient to a sleep specialist for **observation and evaluation of sleeping patterns**. Some sleep tests require that the patient stays over at a sleep centre.

Diagnostic methods used to determine narcolepsy include:

Epworth Sleepiness Scale: This sleep questionnaire consists of questions that have to be ranked on a numbered scale by the patient. An example would be: "Do certain situations make you feel sleepy?"

Nocturnal polysomnogram: This test measures the electrical activity of the brain (electroencephalogram) and heart (electrocardiogram), the movements of muscles (electromyogram) and eyes (electroculogram) as well as respirations (oral thermistor or nasal pressure transducer) during sleep.



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Michele Carelse, Clinical Psychologist



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Michele has had years of experience in the manufacturing and use of natural remedies. In addition, she is a trained Clinical Psychologist and has been incorporating natural remedies into her treatment of patients with depression, anxiety, ADD, ADHD and stress for many years with spectacular results.

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Multiple sleep latency test (MSLT): This test measures how long it takes to fall asleep during the day. The patient is asked to take short naps every two hours and sleep specialists observe sleeping patterns.

Hypocretin Test: This test measures the levels of hypocretin in the fluid that surrounds the spinal cord. A low level of hypocretin can indicate that you have narcolepsy, although this is not always the case.

Narcolepsy is characterized by the following symptoms:

- **Excessive daytime sleepiness:** People with narcolepsy experience sudden, overwhelming urges to sleep during the day. This uncontrollable need to sleep occurs anywhere and at anytime.
- **Cataplexy:** This is the sudden, temporary loss of muscle tone often triggered by intense emotions such as laughter, excitement, fear or anger. Muscles become completely weak which causes physical changes such as slurred speech, knees buckling or your head drooping uncontrollably. Approximately 70% of people with narcolepsy experience cataplexy.
- **Hallucinations:** Hallucinations are referred to as hypnagogic hallucinations and are described as vivid dreamlike experiences occurring while falling asleep or upon awakening. This hallucination occurs when a person falls instantly into REM sleep (rapid eye movement is the period of sleep when most dreaming occurs). When the person starts dreaming, it is most likely he or she is semi-awake, and the dream is experienced as being very real. These dreams may therefore be exceptionally vivid or terrifying.
- **Sleep paralysis:** Paralysis occurs upon falling asleep or awakening. A person with narcolepsy is unable to move or speak for a few minutes, while falling asleep or upon waking up. This sleep paralysis that usually occurs during REM sleep may prevent the body from experiencing the ability to dream. Sleep paralysis is generally experienced in young adulthood.
- **Automatic Behavior:** During sleep episodes, a person suffering from narcolepsy will perform functions and activities such as talking, walking or putting things away without being aware that he or she is actually doing them.

What Causes Narcolepsy?

The cause of narcolepsy is not exactly known, but research suggests that it could be as a result of the **lack of the chemical called hypocretin** in the brain, especially when cataplexy is also present.

Hypocretin stimulates the brain cells and promotes a state of wakefulness. There are factors that may contribute to the **lack of hypocretin** in the brain and they include infection, autoimmune

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reaction, **stress or hormonal changes**.

Help for Narcolepsy

Narcolepsy is a chronic and lifelong condition, but symptoms can be managed and controlled. One should keep in mind that each person is different, and their response to treatment will depend on the severity of their symptoms. Certain medications, lifestyle changes and alternative therapies have proven effective in **reducing the frequency of narcoleptic episodes**.

Often symptoms are severe, and narcolepsy becomes so frustrating, that people immediately turn to conventional medication to relieve symptoms. It is also important to control symptoms to prevent the potential dangers involved in **sudden attacks of sleepiness**.

Medications used primarily to treat narcolepsy include **stimulants and antidepressants**. **Although these medications can help to control the symptoms to varying degrees, they do not address the underlying cause and may cause unwanted side effects.**

Natural treatments can be used in conjunction with conventional medicine or as an alternative and may offer people a safer and all-natural option to **promote optimal health and longevity**. Natural remedies focus on improving symptoms and can also help to support one's physical, mental and emotional health.

A combination of herbal and homeopathic treatments with beneficial ingredients such as Hypericum perforatum, Schizandra chinensis, Calcium lactate, Magnesium lactate and Vitamin B6 can provide relief for narcoleptics. By incorporating natural remedies into your treatment plan, you will be able to **maintain regular sleeping patterns** and improve your quality of life. It is important not to stop your prescription medication without consulting your doctor or seeking the supervision of a complimentary health practitioner or homeopath.

A holistic approach

By opting for a more holistic approach, natural and alternative treatments can complement conventional medicine. Complementary therapies and other treatment modalities to consider including in the treatment program are:

- Counseling and psychotherapy
- Homeopathy
- Acupuncture
- Aromatherapy
- Spiritual therapy

It is also important to remember that eating healthily and exercising on



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a regular basis helps to improve the quality of a person's sleep and relieves the stresses of daily life.

People who are suffering from narcolepsy can incorporate lifestyle changes which will help them manage this condition.

Try to:

- Establish a structured [sleeping routine](#) by maintaining a sleeping and rising time as well as having daytime naps.
- Have access to family, marriage and occupational counseling.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol and nicotine especially during the afternoon and at night.
- Join a support group.
- Be responsible – don't drive or handle hazardous equipment if you feel sleepy
- Spend time outdoors after waking up as this regulates the body's biological clock.
- Ensure that your sleeping environment is peaceful and comfortable, and is used primarily for sleeping.
- Keep a sleep journal to jot down your sleeping patterns and habits.
- Carry a tape recorder with you to record important conversations that you may forget when you feel sleepy.
- Practice visualization and relaxation techniques to assist in sleeping better.
- Reduce stress and maintain an even mood to prevent bringing on a narcolepsy attack

Treatment of the future?

Because the number of **people with narcolepsy** is relatively low and the 'market' is therefore small, medical research into more permanent cures is not high on the list of priorities for the pharmaceutical companies. However, possible areas of research include stem cell therapy as well as a synthetic form of hypocretin.

The Natural Approach

While Western medicine has become the norm in many cultures, it is not the only treatment option. Conventional western medicine, often called allopathic medicine, is the system of medicine taught at most medical schools and most pharmaceutical and synthetic medicines are manufactured and marketed according to the principles of allopathic medicine. Allopathic medicine is also sometimes called orthodox medicine.

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Because most of us in the Western world have grown up in a society in which allopathic medicine is the prevailing norm, we forget that, only a few decades ago, homeopathic, herbal and other natural medicines were commonly available – and freely used even by conventional doctors. While there are often heated debates about which system of medicine is ‘better’ than the other, many responsible doctors (whether they are allopathic or not) recognize that both have a role to play in the treatment program.

Natural medicine has often been frowned on by conventional doctors, especially by those who did not have sufficient knowledge of these medicines. However, it is encouraging to note that some medical schools are now beginning to re-introduce it into their course work, thereby providing doctors with a wider range of treatment options from which to choose. In many countries, especially in Europe, India and China, natural and homeopathic medicines are commonly prescribed by conventional doctors and represent a significant part of the total annual drug sales.

Naturopathy is a branch of medicine (just as allopathy is a branch of medicine) which operates according to the underlying philosophy that the body has an innate capacity to heal itself. While natural medicines are often called ‘alternative’ or ‘complimentary’ medicines, they are, in fact, a unique and independent form of medicine in their own right, well able to treat a variety of conditions. Perhaps the term ‘holistic’ medicine is more apt, given the broad range of treatment options and approaches which are to be found within the practice of natural medicine, which encompasses many different disciplines, including herbalism, homeopathy, iridology, osteopathy, chiropractic, therapeutic massage techniques, aromatherapy, acupuncture and many, many more.

Most naturopaths will use a variety of treatment modalities in order to treat their patients in a holistic way to support health, relieve symptoms and prevent future disease. In fact, even the World Health Organization defines health as being "... more than simply the absence of illness. It is the active state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being." This is a wonderfully clear description of holistic or natural medicine, which strives to support health (thereby relieving or preventing symptoms), rather than simply eliminating disease.

Although allopathic medicine certainly has a role to play and has made a tremendous contribution to medical science during the past century, there is a growing perception that it is not the only answer and that, in many cases, holistic medicine can accomplish just as much, if not more – without the risk of side effects, addiction and sacrifice to health so commonly associated with pharmaceutical drugs. Contrary to common perception, and provided that they are manufactured in the correct way, natural medicines can work quickly and safely to promote healing.

In many cases, they can succeed where pharmaceutical drugs have failed. Despite frequent reports that they are ‘unproven’ and ‘untested’, the opposite is true. Natural medicines have a long history of usage and

there is a wealth of empirical evidence to support their effectiveness and safety. In addition, active clinical research is carried out by many academic hospitals and universities to support the extensive traditional and empirical evidence behind natural medicines.

It is also important to know that, like any medicine, herbal and homeopathic medicines must be manufactured in the correct way, following acceptable procedures and manufacturing methods to ensure maximum effectiveness and safety. Due to the recent rise in popularity of natural remedies, many companies have sprung up to take advantage of the market. Unfortunately not all of them are equipped to manufacture to the correct standards, often resulting in a flood of inferior (and sometimes even unsafe) remedies onto the market – and giving natural remedies a bad name.

Even some pharmaceutical companies have rushed to claim their market share by producing so-called ‘standardized’ extracts of herbs and offering these as superior to the tried and tested methods of naturopathic manufacturing. Nothing could be further from the truth. While ‘standardized’ extracts may offer benefit of easy consistency of dosage (and cheaper more efficient production lines), they have grave disadvantages. These include an increase in side effects as the medicines produced in this manner lose the natural protective properties of the herbs. In some cases, these side effects have proved fatal – as was seen in the liver toxicity associated with standardized extracts of kava kava, a herb previously safely used for generations without any known side effects.

Most naturopaths recommend what is called the Full Spectrum Method of extraction – which retains the benefits of ALL the active ingredients within the herb as opposed to isolating only one – thereby providing a more complete treatment as well as superior protection against side effects.

Whatever your choice, always choose wisely. Research what is best for you. If you have a chronic or life threatening condition, don't make changes without first discussing them with your doctor in order that your condition may be monitored. Well informed and supportive practitioners will support patients who want to take responsibility for their own health.

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