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VASCULAR SURGERY

Venous Insufficiency and Restless Legs

Ten percent of the population is affected by restless legs syndrome.



Lori Nollac

FHCN PHOTO BY MARC EDWARDS

Restless legs syndrome, or RLS, is believed to affect as much as ten percent of the population in the United States. Lori Nollac is among that group, but it wasn't until she began aging that her RLS symptoms really began to distress her.

In 2009, after retiring from more than 32 years as a federal employee in Kansas City, Missouri, Lori packed her bags and moved to Ft. Myers. Now, her days are so filled with activities that she can't imagine having to fit in a full-time job.

"I sometimes wonder how I had time to work, because I keep very busy as a retired person," she remarks. "I have recently taken up stained glasswork. I'm just finishing up a project for my mother that's a big angel. Another thing I do with my time is ride my motorcycle trike, and since I've retired, I've also taken up scuba diving."

It was in the evenings and at night when Lori's restless legs would cause her distress and disrupt her lifestyle. This

late-in-the-day onset of symptoms is a primary characteristic of RLS. The most commonly reported symptom of the syndrome – and one often experienced by Lori – is a throbbing, creeping or crawling sensation in the legs. This uncomfortable feeling leads to an uncontrollable, and many times overwhelming, urge to move the legs in order to get relief.



JOSEPH G. MAGNANT, MD, FACS, RPVI

"For me, my muscles were affected when I would sit for long periods, like at a movie theater or when visiting with people in the evening," she relates. "In order to relieve what I felt, I'd have to move them [my legs], and there were times it was so severe, I had to get up and walk around. At times, it was pretty unbearable.

"Sometimes, especially when first going to sleep, it would be bothering me, and I would be moving my legs and tossing and turning in bed. So sometimes trying to get to sleep initially was difficult. And after a long day of being on my feet, my legs would be very achy at night, so I had issues with that as well."

Hope for Lori came from a direction she didn't expect. Her partner, who had severe issues with her leg veins, had gone to see Joseph G. Magnant, MD, FACS, RPVI, a board-certified vascular surgeon who specializes in vein treatment. His practice, Vein Specialists, with offices in Fort Myers and Bonita Springs, is

dedicated to the modern evaluation and treatment of leg vein disorders. Lori's partner had had symptoms in her legs similar to her own, but they had disappeared after seeing Dr. Magnant. Lori put two and two together.

"My partner had restless legs also," confirms Lori, "but she had her vein worked on, and she said that since she had the procedure, she wasn't having that issue anymore. So that was my first clue that I could get some relief through the vein treatment.

"I had such a severe problem with restless legs that I went to see Dr. Magnant to get evaluated."

Venous contribution

Veins are blood vessels that are specially designed to pump blood back toward the heart, against the force of gravity. Inside the veins are a series of one-way valves that open and close with the rhythm of muscle contractions. Healthy valves close tightly, keeping blood moving upward toward the heart. With vein disease or *venous insufficiency*, the valves do not close properly, causing pooling of blood in the leg veins, which leads to myriad signs and symptoms.

"Venous insufficiency has many signs and symptoms," states Dr. Magnant, "and they go beyond the visible varicose veins. They include achy legs, swollen legs and skin discoloration and ulceration. Vein disease can also be a contributing factor in the development of RLS."

With venous insufficiency, the valves of the deep and/or superficial veins of the lower extremities are either stuck or scarred in the open position or, more often, are floppy and continue to open,

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Venous Insufficiency and Restless Legs

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or *prolapse*, beyond the closed position. This results in reflux, or backward blood flow in the veins, which produces increased hydrostatic pressure in the downstream venous system.

Typically, the normal pressure in healthy veins, veins in which the valves are closing properly, is approximately ten millimeters of mercury at the level of the ankle when a patient is standing, notes Dr. Magnant.

“If the valves are leaking from the groin all the way down to the ankle, by the end of the day the pressure could be as high as eighty or one hundred millimeters of mercury,” he explains. “All of that extra pressure causes fluid to leak out of the veins into the skin, fat and muscle, causing pain and swelling.

“It is thought that the return of this fluid, which contains water and protein, from the muscles back into the lymph vessels at night, when the legs are elevated, can trigger a cellular electrolyte imbalance and the symptoms of RLS.”

Thus, RLS symptoms often go hand-in-hand with venous insufficiency. However, not everyone with RLS has venous insufficiency, and not everyone with venous insufficiency has RLS.

“We recommend that, before patients start taking prescription medication for restless legs syndrome, they request a consult by a qualified vein specialist. He or she will likely perform ultrasound evaluation to identify whether there is significant underlying venous insufficiency that might be causing or contributing to their problem,” says Dr. Magnant.

“There is no downside to getting an ultrasound; there is no radiation involved, no needles, no pain and it is a physiologic test that reveals which veins are leaking and how much they are leaking. Venous ultrasound for insufficiency is conservative and noninvasive, and it accurately identifies which patients are most likely to benefit from treatment.

“Clearly, other causes of RLS exist,” acknowledges the doctor. “However, we encourage patients to consider venous insufficiency as a contributing factor and to request a venous insufficiency evaluation by an experienced vein specialist prior to undergoing a million-dollar workup for other diagnoses or initiating medical therapy for RLS.”

Calming effects

Dr. Magnant and Vein Specialists left Lori feeling more than satisfied. She was extremely pleased with her treatment, both the procedure and the behavior of the doctor and staff.

“I thought they were great,” she states. “I think the vein clinic is excellent. He runs a very friendly office.

“I had my first leg done on the day before Thanksgiving, and Dr. Magnant himself actually called me later in the day on Thanksgiving to check and see how I was doing. His nurses normally do that but they were off for the holiday, so he himself called, and I was pretty impressed with that.”

More important are the results of the procedure. As with her partner, Lori’s vein treatment had a very positive effect on her restless legs symptoms.

“I have not had any more restless leg issues like I had before,” she reports. “I have not had [the feeling] when I’m sitting down that I have to keep moving my legs and get up. That is gone. I have not noticed any trouble at all going to sleep. Now, at the end of the day, if I’ve been on my feet a lot, I don’t have the achiness in my legs that I did before.

“I think people who have restless legs really ought to see Dr. Magnant because they could get some true relief. It’s a simple procedure to be checked out with the ultrasound.

“I think they are excellent in every way,” Lori says of Vein Specialists. “As a doctor, he’s one of the best I’ve ever had. It was a great experience.” *FHCN—Patti DiPanfilo*



FHCN PHOTO BY MARC EDWARDS

Now that her restless legs symptoms are gone, Lori can sit, work on her stained glass projects or both in comfort.

What is RLS?



In order for patients to be officially diagnosed with restless legs syndrome, they must meet the criteria described in the four bullets below:

- Patients have a strong urge to move their legs, which they may not be able to resist.
- RLS symptoms start or become worse when a patient is resting.
- RLS symptoms get better when patients move their legs. Relief persists as long as the motor activity continues.
- RLS symptoms are worse in the evening, especially when lying down.

RLS can also cause difficulty in falling or staying asleep, which can be one of the chief complaints of the syndrome.

** Information provided by the RLS Foundation*



Joseph G. Magnant, MD, FACS, RPVI, is a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons and is board certified by the American Board of Surgery in vascular surgery. He earned his medical degree from Medical College of Virginia. He completed a general surgery residency at Medical College of Virginia Hospitals and a fellowship in vascular surgery at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, Lebanon, NH. Dr. Magnant of Vein Specialists focuses exclusively on vein evaluation and modern treatments in a dedicated, outpatient, vein-centered facility. Dr. Magnant is an active member of the American College of Phlebology, Society for Vascular Surgery and Society of Vascular Ultrasound.

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Smooth out your problem veins

Dr. Magnant welcomes all calls regarding this article as well as other topics related to veins. His offices are located at **1510 Royal Palm Square Blvd., Suite 101**, in Fort Myers and at **3359 Woods Edge Circle, Suite 102**, in Bonita Springs. Please phone **(239) 694-VEIN (8346)** for more information or to schedule an appointment. Visit his website, weknowveins.com, or email him at info@weknowveins.com.

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215 Bullard Parkway
Temple Terrace, FL 33617
(813) 989-1330

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