MERCOLA
Take Control of Your Health

Treating Restless Legs Slashes Risk of Parkinson's Disease

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Mercola | July 20, 2026

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Restless leg syndrome (RLS) isn't just a sleep problem — it's a neurological signal that your brain's dopamine and iron systems are under stress, and addressing it early helps protect long-term brain health
- A JAMA Network Open study found that people with RLS were significantly more likely to develop Parkinson's disease than those without it
- RLS patients who received treatment had four times fewer Parkinson's diagnoses than untreated individuals, suggesting that managing RLS symptoms supports neurological resilience
- Iron levels, poor sleep quality, and disrupted waste clearance in the brain all appear to link RLS and Parkinson's, underscoring the importance of restoring iron balance and improving sleep hygiene
- By optimizing dopamine naturally, maintaining healthy iron levels, getting quality sleep, and staying physically active during the day, you can calm restless legs now and strengthen your brain against degeneration later

Restless nights filled with twitching, aching, or tingling legs are a message from your body that something deeper is off balance. For many people, what starts as a mild nighttime disturbance slowly erodes sleep, focus, and daily energy. Over time, this constant restlessness — known as restless leg syndrome (RLS) — can point to underlying changes in your brain that deserve attention long before more serious problems take root.

Most people dismiss these sensations as harmless or a sign of stress, but research suggests they reflect disruptions in your brain's natural rhythms.[1] When the systems that regulate movement and rest fall out of sync, the result isn't just lost sleep — it's a signal that your nervous system is struggling to maintain balance.

Recognizing that signal early is your best chance to protect your long-term neurological health. You're about to see why addressing restless leg syndrome early matters far more than once believed — and how research has revealed its surprising connection to one of the most challenging movement disorders of our time — Parkinson's disease.

Treatment for Restless Legs Linked to Delayed Parkinson's Onset

A Korean cohort study, published in JAMA Network Open, analyzed health records from nearly 20,000 adults over 17 years to explore whether RLS increases the likelihood of developing Parkinson's disease.[2] RLS causes an uncontrollable urge to move your legs, often accompanied by tingling or aching sensations that worsen at rest and improve with movement.

Parkinson's disease, by contrast, is a degenerative disorder characterized by tremors, slowed movement, and muscle stiffness resulting from the gradual loss of dopamine-producing neurons. Researchers aimed to determine if RLS precedes Parkinson's — or if treating RLS affects how soon Parkinson's appears.

- **People with restless legs were more likely to develop Parkinson's over time —** Of the 9,919 participants diagnosed with RLS, 1.6% later developed Parkinson's disease, compared with 1% in the control group. Although the absolute difference is small, the finding was statistically significant and supports the idea that RLS is linked to higher Parkinson's incidence.

  The study measured disease onset using "restricted mean survival time," a method that captures differences in how long participants remained Parkinson's-free. Those with RLS developed PD slightly sooner on average than those without the condition.

- **Dopamine agonist treatment was associated with lower Parkinson's incidence —** The researchers divided RLS patients into two groups: those who received dopamine agonist therapy — medications like pramipexole or ropinirole that mimic dopamine activity — and those who did not. Only 0.5% of treated patients developed Parkinson's, compared with 2.1% in the untreated group.

  This means the untreated group had more than four times the number of Parkinson's cases. The treated group also experienced a small but statistically significant delay in PD diagnosis — about 0.03 years (roughly 11 days) — indicating that effective symptom control might influence disease progression.

- **Untreated RLS appeared to accelerate Parkinson's onset —** Individuals with untreated Parkinson's showed both higher incidence and earlier diagnosis of Parkinson's. While the study design cannot prove causation, it suggests untreated RLS reflects deeper neurological stress rather than being a harmless sleep issue. These results highlight that timely management of RLS symptoms could have broader implications for brain health.

- **Dopamine drugs often make restless legs worse in the long run —** Medications like ropinirole and pramipexole may calm symptoms at first, but prolonged use frequently triggers augmentation — a rebound effect where symptoms return earlier in the day, spread to other body parts, and grow more intense than before treatment began.[3]

  This occurs because long-term dopamine stimulation disrupts your brain's natural dopamine balance, forcing your body to crave ever-higher doses for diminishing relief.

  In many cases, this cycle leaves patients worse off than when they started. For that reason, non-drug strategies — such as walking, optimizing iron and **vitamin D levels**, improving sleep quality, and supporting mitochondrial function — offer safer, more sustainable relief without fueling the underlying problem.

The Connection Between RLS and Parkinson's Involves More Than Just Dopamine

While both RLS and Parkinson's involve dopamine dysfunction, the study found clues that other systems are likely involved. One theory points to iron deficiency. While many people struggle with too much iron, iron is necessary for dopamine production, and people with low ferritin (a measure of iron storage) are more likely to experience RLS.

Another explanation involves the glymphatic system, which clears waste products from your brain during deep sleep. When sleep is disrupted by constant movement, these toxic proteins accumulate and damage neurons, contributing to the same brain changes seen in Parkinson's disease.

- **Sleep quality and brain detoxification emerged as key factors —** Many people with RLS also experience insomnia or sleep apnea, both of which increase inflammation and oxidative stress in your brain.

  Chronic sleep loss damages mitochondria — the tiny power plants inside your cells — making neurons more vulnerable to degeneration. The study suggests that better sleep hygiene and treatment of RLS-related sleep issues could help preserve neurological function over time.

- **Iron balance and inflammation are likely part of the link —** The researchers acknowledged that iron plays a dual role: too little iron impairs dopamine synthesis, while too much promotes oxidative damage.

  Individuals with RLS often have lower iron levels, which contribute to both movement symptoms and long-term neuronal stress. Although the study did not test interventions, maintaining optimal iron levels could help support dopamine balance and reduce neuroinflammation.

- **RLS is not simply a sleep disturbance —** It's a neurological signal worth addressing early. The study showed that people who treated their RLS had fewer Parkinson's diagnoses and remained symptom-free for longer periods. Managing RLS through

iron optimization and sleep improvement could therefore do more than restore rest — it could help preserve your brain's resilience against degenerative change.

- **Early detection and proactive care make the difference —** Because RLS is often underdiagnosed, many people live with it for years before seeking help. This research reframes RLS as a possible early marker of neurological vulnerability. Recognizing and addressing it promptly offers a practical way to protect both your nightly rest and your long-term neurological health.

How to Stop Restless Legs and Protect Your Brain from Parkinson's

If your legs start to twitch or ache at night and you feel like you have to move them to get relief, that's your body asking for help. RLS signals that your brain's energy and dopamine systems are under stress.

Fortunately, addressing these imbalances early could do more than ease discomfort. It could also help protect your brain from the same neurodegenerative changes that lead to Parkinson's disease. You have far more control than you think, and small daily actions make a measurable difference.

1. **Rebuild dopamine balance naturally —** Dopamine is the chemical messenger that controls movement, motivation, and pleasure — and low dopamine activity drives both restless legs and Parkinson's disease. To support healthy dopamine production, start with what you eat.

   Your body makes dopamine from the amino acid tyrosine, found in pastured eggs, grass fed beef, and raw dairy. Avoid alcohol and processed foods, which deplete dopamine reserves. Regular daylight exposure also stimulates dopamine through your eyes and skin, supporting both mood and movement.

2. **Correct hidden iron imbalances —** Iron is required for your brain to make dopamine, yet both too little and too much create oxidative stress. Low ferritin levels are common in restless leg syndrome and increase Parkinson's risk. If you don't know your ferritin level, that's where you start. Ferritin is the storage form of iron, and the ideal range is between 60 and 75 ng/mL. High ferritin levels indicate your body is holding onto too much iron, which leaks into your brain and triggers damage.

   If your levels are high, regular blood donation helps reduce iron stores safely and supports overall metabolic health. If your levels are low, focus on iron-rich whole foods like pasture-raised red meat, oysters, and egg yolks instead of supplements — unless testing confirms a significant deficiency. Pair iron sources with vitamin C-rich foods such as oranges or bell peppers to boost absorption.

3. **Protect your sleep to protect your brain —** Your brain clears waste during deep sleep. When your legs move all night, that cleanup process fails, allowing toxins to build up and damage neurons. Prioritize consistent sleep-wake times, limit screen exposure and bright lights after sunset, and aim for a dark, cool sleeping environment.

   Magnesium before bed supports relaxation and helps restore normal sleep architecture. Avoid caffeine and alcohol, as both interfere with dopamine and melatonin signaling. Restful sleep isn't a luxury — it's a nightly neurological reset that keeps your brain clear and resilient.

4. **Support mitochondrial energy production —** Restless legs often signal deeper problems with how your cells produce energy. Mitochondria — your cellular "batteries" — require oxygen, magnesium, and healthy glucose metabolism to generate adenosine triphosphate (ATP), your body's main energy currency. Chronic stress, poor diet, and exposure to seed oils all impair this process.

   Replace seed oils with tallow, ghee, or grass fed butter to stop damaging mitochondrial membranes. Eat enough carbohydrates from fruit, root vegetables, and white rice to keep glucose available for energy production. For most adults, that

means 250 grams of healthy carbohydrates daily, with higher amounts if you're very active. Low-carb diets worsen **reductive stress** and intensify RLS symptoms over time.

5. **Move your body during the day, not at night —** Movement during the day improves circulation, stabilizes dopamine levels, and benefits RLS.[4] If your job keeps you sedentary, aim to stand or walk for at least five minutes every hour. Gentle strength training, stretching, or yoga early in the day promotes better sleep and reduces nighttime symptoms.

   Exercise, including daily walks, also increases mitochondrial density in your muscles, improving their ability to relax instead of contract involuntarily. Think of daily movement as a signal to your brain that it's safe to rest later.

Your legs don't move restlessly by accident — they're reflecting what's happening inside your cells. By restoring dopamine balance, optimizing iron, improving sleep, and supporting energy production, you give your brain the stability it needs to stay strong for decades.

FAQs About RLS and Parkinson's Disease

Q: What is RLS and why does it matter?

A: RLS is a neurological disorder that causes uncomfortable sensations in your legs, often leading to an uncontrollable urge to move them — especially at night. It's not just a sleep problem; it signals deeper imbalances in your brain's dopamine and iron systems. Left untreated, RLS has been linked to a higher risk of developing Parkinson's disease.

Q: How strong is the link between RLS and Parkinson's disease?

A: According to research published in JAMA Network Open, adults with RLS were more likely to develop Parkinson's than those without it.[5] While the absolute numbers were small, the connection was statistically significant. Untreated RLS cases showed both higher incidence and earlier diagnosis of Parkinson's, while those treated had fewer cases overall.

Q: How does treating restless legs influence Parkinson's risk?

A: People with RLS who used dopamine agonists — drugs that mimic dopamine's effects — had roughly four times fewer Parkinson's diagnoses than untreated individuals. Although this doesn't prove causation, it suggests that restoring dopamine balance and reducing sleep disruption could help delay or reduce neurological stress linked to Parkinson's.

Q: What lifestyle steps support healthy dopamine and iron balance?

A: Eating nutrient-dense foods rich in tyrosine — such as pastured eggs, grass fed beef, and raw dairy — supports dopamine production. Maintaining ferritin levels between 60 and 75 ng/mL helps prevent both iron deficiency and overload. Regular sunlight exposure, daily movement, and limiting alcohol and processed foods also aid dopamine function.

Q: What daily habits help reduce RLS symptoms and protect brain health?

A: To calm restless legs and safeguard your brain, focus on these core habits:

- Keep a consistent sleep schedule and dark, cool bedroom environment.
- Avoid alcohol and caffeine in the evening.
- Replace seed oils with tallow, ghee, or grass fed butter to protect mitochondria.

- Get 250 grams or more of healthy carbohydrates daily, starting with easily digestible options like fruit and white rice.
- Move often during the day — walk, stretch, and perform gentle resistance exercise.

Sources and References

- [1, 2, 5] JAMA Network Open October 6, 2025;8;(10):e2535759
- [3] Cureus. 2025 Aug 29;17(8):e91241
- [4] Mov Disord Clin Pract. 2023 Jul 27;10(9):1349-1359