



fact sheet

EXCESSIVE SLEEPINESS (ES)

What is excessive sleepiness (ES)?

- Excessive sleepiness is the primary symptom – and often the most debilitating feature – associated with obstructive sleep apnea/hypopnea syndrome, shift work sleep disorder and narcolepsy. It is also a common symptom of many neurological and psychiatric disorders, including Parkinson’s disease and depression.
- Sleepiness is a physiological indication of the need for sleep, analogous to hunger reflecting the need for food.
- ES is defined as difficulty in maintaining wakefulness and an increased likelihood of falling asleep in inappropriate situations. It has been associated with a reduction of activity in the cerebral cortex of the brain.
- The defining characteristic of ES is a consistent inability to stay awake and alert enough to safely and successfully accomplish tasks of daily living.
- ES occurs in up to five percent of the U.S. population.¹
- Persons experiencing ES who seek medical attention typically complain of fatigue, tiredness, lapses of attention, lack of energy, low motivation, difficulty concentrating, disrupted sleep, snoring or difficulties at work.
- Although many sleep problems are transient, millions of Americans have chronic sleep disorders. Unfortunately, 50 to 90 percent of these cases go undiagnosed and, therefore, untreated.

What are the consequences of ES?

- Falling asleep during waking hours can have the same far-reaching consequences as not being able to sleep at night, if the urge for sleep is uncontrollable and occurs at inappropriate times.
- Fifty percent of all accidents at work and 25 percent of all accidents at home are caused by ES.
- According to the National Sleep Foundation 2000 “Sleep in America” Survey, respondents who reported a level of daytime sleepiness that interferes with daily activity indicated that: ES interferes with their daily activities (43 percent), their jobs (30 percent), their family duties (25 percent), their social lives (28 percent), and their relationships with family and friends (29 percent).

- While the most common cause of ES is poor sleep hygiene, millions of Americans who practice healthy sleep habits continue to suffer from ES.
- Other common causes of ES are sleep, neurological and psychiatric disorders such as obstructive sleep apnea, shift work sleep disorder, narcolepsy, Parkinson's disease and depression.¹

What causes ES?

A variety of objective and subjective measures are available to assess ES. According to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine (formerly the American Sleep Disorders Association), sleepiness can be categorized as mild, moderate or severe.²

How is ES categorized and measured?

- **Mild Sleepiness:** Sleep episodes occur during times of rest or when little attention is required. Mild sleepiness may become evident in situations such as watching television, reading or being a passenger in a moving vehicle. On the Multiple Sleep Latency Test (MSLT), mild sleepiness would manifest as a mean sleep latency of 10 to 15 minutes.
- **Moderate Sleepiness:** Sleep episodes are present daily and occur during physical activities requiring a moderate degree of attention. Moderate sleepiness may occur in situations such as during concerts, movies, meetings and driving. On the MSLT, moderate sleepiness would manifest as a mean sleep latency of five to 10 minutes.
- **Severe Sleepiness:** Sleep episodes are present daily and at times of physical activities that require mild to moderate attention. Situations in which severe sleepiness may occur include eating a meal, during conversation, driving, walking and physical activities. The symptoms of severe sleepiness produce a marked impairment of social and occupational function. On the MSLT, severe sleepiness would manifest as a mean sleep latency of less than five minutes.
- Individuals suffering from ES may suffer from a more serious underlying condition. It is important for individuals with persistent excessive sleepiness to seek a thorough medical evaluation to determine the cause of their excessive sleepiness.
- Despite treatment of the underlying disorder, ES can persist. In such cases, behavioral measures may be used, such as maximizing efforts to obtain sufficient sleep. Even with these efforts, some patients may require other therapies such as surgery, devices or medications.

Treatment

¹ National Commission on Sleep Disorders Research. Report of the National Commission on Sleep Disorders Research: *Wake Up America: A National Sleep Alert*. Department of Human Services (Program 470-M) 1993.

² American Sleep Disorders Association. *International Classification of Sleep Disorders, Revised: Diagnostic and Coding Manual*. Rochester, Minn: American Sleep Disorders Association; 1997:23.