Narcolepsy

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Understanding Narcolepsy in School Settings

Narcolepsy is a common cause of chronic sleepiness, affecting about 1 in 2,000 people. Narcolepsy typically develops during the teen years and lasts for life. Narcolepsy is a manageable condition, and students with narcolepsy can lead full and rewarding lives.

SYMPTOMS

Narcolepsy is a neurological disorder that causes persistent sleepiness and additional symptoms such as brief episodes of muscle weakness known as cataplexy; vivid, dreamlike hallucinations; brief episodes of paralysis when falling asleep or upon awakening (sleep paralysis); and fragmented nighttime sleep. Symptoms typically develop over several months and last a lifetime. More about each symptom and how it may appear in children:

- People with narcolepsy have periods of **sleepiness** every day, even after a good night's sleep. In addition to dozing off in class, children with narcolepsy often have difficulty sustaining attention for long periods of time, resulting in inattentiveness, poor memory, and disorganization. Sleepiness can be especially problematic during long tasks such as final exams. In younger children, sleepiness can sometimes appear as impulsivity, hyperactivity, poor mood regulation, or aggressiveness. The sleepiness of narcolepsy often improves for several hours after a 15- to 20-minute nap.
- **Cataplexy** is often triggered by strong emotions and causes weakness of the face, limbs, and trunk, sometimes leading an individual to slump to the ground, awake but unable to talk or move for up to one or two minutes. In children, cataplexy can sometimes appear as mild weakness lasting for hours, with a slack face, half-closed eyes, slight tongue protrusion, and a wobbly, unsteady gait.
- **Hallucinations** can occur while an individual is falling asleep or just waking up. Discerning dreams from reality can be especially difficult for young children with narcolepsy.
- **Sleep paralysis** is a transient inability to move when an individual is drifting off to sleep or waking up.
- **Fragmented sleep** at night can worsen daytime sleepiness.

CAUSES

Research has revealed that narcolepsy with cataplexy is caused by the lack of hypocretins, key brain chemicals that help sustain alertness and also prevent rapid-eye-movement (REM) sleep from occurring at the wrong times. In people who have narcolepsy with cataplexy, most of the hypocretin-producing neurons die off. Genetics, age, and triggering infections or inflammation play important roles in the development of narcolepsy.

Though much has been learned about narcolepsy with cataplexy, considerably less is known about the cause of narcolepsy without cataplexy. Most likely, it is caused by less severe injury to the hypocretin neurons, resulting in fewer and less severe symptoms.

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