

Sleepy students are not uncommon. Many factors contribute to this, from natural changes in teen sleep patterns to early school start times. Sleep disorders like narcolepsy can be a factor as well, but are often the last thing parents and educators consider when dealing with a struggling student

Narcolepsy is a chronic neurological disorder in which the sleep/wake cycle is severely disrupted. It affects about 1 in 2,000 people in the United States, and symptoms usually begin in adolescence, but it can take years for people with narcolepsy (PWNs) to be properly diagnosed. Some symptoms of narcolepsy are also common in other conditions such as ADD and depression. As a result, narcolepsy is frequently misdiagnosed.



Excessive Daytime Sleepiness (EDS) and chronic sleep deprivation associated with narcolepsy can severely impact students' daily lives and academic performance, and cannot be overcome without proper treatment. Academic accommodations, support, medications, and lifestyle changes can help PWNs succeed in school.

Early diagnosis and treatment leads to better outcomes. Increasing awareness of narcolepsy and sleep disorders in school is the first step towards this goal. Educators can play an important role in identifying students when the symptoms of narcolepsy first appear.

Narcolepsy Network is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing early diagnosis of narcolepsy, advocating for and supporting persons with narcolepsy and their families, and promoting critical research for treatment and a cure.

For more information,
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Narcolepsy in the Classroom



a guide for educators and parents

Students with Narcolepsy

Narcolepsy Symptoms

Narcolepsy is caused by the loss of brain cells that produce hypocretin (aka orexin), the chemical that regulates sleeping and waking. Symptoms include:

- **Excessive Daytime Sleepiness (EDS):** Uncontrollable periods of an irresistible need to sleep. Persistent drowsiness may continue for prolonged periods of time and microsleeps, or fleeting moments of sleep, may intrude into the waking state.
- **Cataplexy:** Sudden loss of muscle tone, often triggered by strong emotions, such as laughter or anger, manifests as muscle weakness. Some examples of a cataplexy episode include, buckling of the knees, eyelids fluttering, odd jaw or mouth movements, and a dropping of the head. Full-body collapses from cataplexy are rare. Some PWNs learn to repress their emotions to try to prevent cataplexy attacks, which can have negative social repercussions.
- **Hypnagogic/Hypnopompic Hallucinations:** Vivid, life-like “waking dreams” that occur on the edge of sleeping and waking and can be hard to distinguish from reality.
- **Sleep Paralysis:** Temporary inability to move or

speak while falling asleep or waking up.

- **Disrupted Nighttime Sleep:** Difficulty falling asleep and staying asleep at night; vivid, often frightening dreams may occur. This can lead to sleep deprivation.

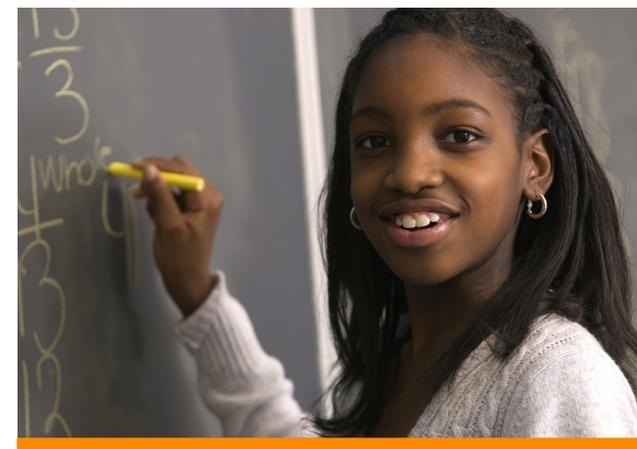
There are two types of narcolepsy. Cataplexy does not occur in Type 2.

Excessive Daytime Sleepiness in the Classroom

EDS is more than just feeling tired or sleepy at inappropriate times. Other issues associated with

EDS and sleep deprivation include:

- **Microsleep and automatic behavior**
“It’s like sleeping with my eyes open.”
During microsleep episodes, a student’s brain is effectively “asleep”, but he or she may continue their activity automatically. If this happens while taking notes, for example, the student may look as though they are writing, but the handwriting will be illegible, and they will have no memory of the episode.
- **“Brain Fog”**
“It feels like there’s a fuzzy barrier between you and the rest of the world.”
Brain fog makes it difficult to concentrate and pay attention. Information is difficult to process, and it can feel like the brain is running at half-speed.
- **Memory and focus problems**
“I feel scatterbrained all the time.”
Sleep deprivation can impact memory, especially short term memory. EDS also makes it harder to stay focused, particularly if the task is boring or repetitive. EDS can make the student become forgetful and, therefore, disorganized.



EDS is a major source of academic problems for PWN. Many of the subtle signs of EDS are easy to overlook, as students often develop unconscious coping mechanisms to mask their symptoms. Fidgeting, excessive talking, or movement may be an unconscious strategy to stay awake.

Other Symptoms

In addition to EDS, other symptoms of narcolepsy that might show up in the classroom can include:

- **Weight gain**
Sudden weight gain is common. Students may also seem to lose interest in activities due to lack of energy or cataplexy.
- **Low self-esteem**
Problems can result from a lack of understanding from family, friends, and teachers. Involuntary sleepiness can be stigmatized as laziness.

Accommodations

Narcolepsy is an invisible disability, like dyslexia or ADD, and PWNs are legally entitled to academic accommodations. Helpful accommodations include: extended time on tests and quizzes, modified homework assignments, and starting school later.

