

NARCOLEPSY IN THE WORKPLACE

WHAT IS NARCOLEPSY?

Narcolepsy is a real and serious neurological disorder that prevents the brain from regulating sleep cycles normally. It affects approximately 1 in 2000 people, or 0.05% of the population.

Symptoms include daytime sleepiness, disrupted night time sleep, cataplexy (usually momentary paralysis of muscles), hallucinations upon falling asleep or waking, and sleep paralysis. Not every person with narcolepsy will experience all of these symptoms.

Narcolepsy is diagnosed by a sleep study that measures brain waves, you can't just fake it!

Please visit www.falling-asleep.com for more detailed information.

VARIABILITY

One difficult aspect of narcolepsy is its variability - no two patients will have an identical experience. Each will have their own combination of symptoms, at differing levels of severity and frequency. Narcolepsy is highly unpredictable and sleep attacks can strike at almost any time. The level of general fatigue experienced can also change greatly from day to day.

Many people with narcolepsy will experience days where they feel great and hardly affected by their condition, and then other days where functioning normally becomes more difficult. This does not mean they are getting better or faking their illness, it is part of the natural range.

COMMON ISSUES:	INABILITY TO STAY AWAKE	BRAIN FOG, MEMORY, AND FOCUS ISSUES	TENDENCY FOR LATENESS
REASON:	Rapid cycling between sleep and wake can result in periods of involuntary sleep, especially when sitting relaxed	Constant lack of deep, restful sleep creates ongoing fatigue and being trapped in states between wake and sleep can cause confusion	Mornings can be a difficult time to wake up and some experience inability to wake even with alarms etc.
POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Positioned in well-lit area with natural light• Ability to nap without shame (with appropriate space and privacy, time can be negotiated depending on needs of both parties)• Ability to take stimulant medication e.g. if there is a drug policy this should be taken into consideration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Set tasks in writing• Schedule meetings well in advance, at times of peak wakefulness where possible• Larger, more difficult tasks can be broken into smaller, more manageable chunks• Sleep-inducing tasks like reading long documents to be scheduled for peak hours of wakefulness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Flexible time schedule to fit patterns of peak wakefulness e.g. if they are often tired in the morning they might come in 2 hours later and leave 2 hours later• Focus on number of tasks completed instead of number of hours - if the right amount of work is getting done there shouldn't be a problem

ACCOMMODATIONS

Just as a person with a physical injury might need accommodations to help them work to the best of their ability, so too do those with neurological conditions. When discussing accommodations with an employee with narcolepsy, be sure to talk through their own individual circumstances as there are no "one size fits all" solutions. Keep in mind that most accommodations that can help people with narcolepsy will not cost you extra money or take up lots of extra time, in most cases only requiring small modifications and a tolerant attitude.

While many of these things might seem inconsequential to the average person, they can make a world of difference to a person with narcolepsy and should not be taken lightly.

It may also be beneficial to discuss narcolepsy with the employee's co-workers to ensure that there is a supportive working environment, so that the employee affected does not face judgement for looking tired or for using their required accommodations (e.g. taking naps). However, this should depend on the willingness of the employee to disclose this private medical information.