

Narcolepsy for Educators



Narcolepsy

What you need to know

Narcolepsy is a neurological disorder which occurs when the brain cannot control the wake/sleep cycle. It greatly disrupts a person's daily life. Due to the symptoms of narcolepsy, students suffering from the disorder face many challenges in education.

Main symptoms of narcolepsy:

- Excessive Daytime Sleepiness
- Cataplexy
- Micro Sleep/Automatic Behavior



Excessive Daytime Sleepiness

Excessive Daytime Sleepiness (EDS) is the symptom most troubling for a student. EDS is most common during moments of inactivity and when a student is required to concentrate for a long period of time. Therefore the classroom is an ideal setting for excessive daytime sleepiness.

Students become increasingly forgetful and scatter-brained when suffering from EDS. These uncontrollable attacks are often mistaken for laziness. When a student experiences EDS, they want to stay awake but are physically incapable of doing so. EDS happens very suddenly with no warning.

Cataplexy

Cataplexy is the sudden and brief loss of muscle strength. Cataplexy is triggered by strong emotions such as laughter, embarrassment or stress. The student is fully conscious during an attack, however they are unable to talk. Cataplexy attacks can last a few seconds to several minutes.

The severity of cataplexy attacks can vary. Minor attacks include weakness in the knees, sagging facial muscles, slurred speech and head dropping. A severe attack is a full collapse from the sudden loses all muscle control.

Micro Sleep Automatic Behavior

Micro sleep is when a student automatically continues an activity (talking, writing) for several seconds unaware they are doing so.

Micro sleep only lasts a few seconds at a time. When they wake up, the student has no memory of what occurred during micro sleep. This means students with narcolepsy could be missing key points in a lesson and miss taking important notes.

A students eyes may be open and their pen moving, however they might not be awake.

Anything written during micro sleep tends to be illegible and resembles scribbles. Speech is the same, during micro sleep speech tends to be slurred or mumbled.



Accommodations

In a learning environment



Seating Preference

Please ask the student if they have any seating preferences. Assigning a front row seat may be helpful from an educators perspective. But a student with narcolepsy may find it stressful as the entire class would notice if they had an episode of EDS or micro sleep.

Leave Them Be

When EDS occurs give the student 5-10 minutes to sleep. Afterwards, wake them discretely.

Don't embarrass them

As previously mentioned, students with narcolepsy don't like zoning out. Calling out to the student or putting them on the spot can be embarrassing. Especially during EDS or micro sleep. Embarrassment makes it harder for the student to concentrate and will only hinder them further.

Embarrassment is a common emotional reaction that triggers cataplexy.

Give Them Time

Students suffering from narcolepsy can be slow to respond when called upon. Educators should allow the student enough time to respond before moving onto another student.

Fidgeting

Students with narcolepsy have difficulty concentrating for long periods, especially in a classroom environment. Fidgeting such as foot tapping, stretching, pen clicking are attempts to counteract sleepiness. Fidgeting can sometimes be a behavioural response and the student may be unaware of what they are doing.

Cataplexy Attacks

In the event the student is experiencing cataplexy and has fully collapsed, please stay by the student and make sure they are out of harms way. They will naturally come around after roughly 5 minutes. If not, it is advised to seek medical advice.

Scheduled Naps

Short scheduled naps can be a huge benefit to students living with narcolepsy. If possible, a safe, quiet space should be provided to accommodate naps. Educators should be made aware of scheduled naps, if class time is missed.

Medication

Educators should be aware of what medication the student is taking. Schools which do not allow students to self-administer drugs should ensure the medication is stored safely in a locker/locked press or entrusted to a nurse or SNA.

Find Out More

Engage with your student and their Parents/Guardians. Each Person With Narcolepsy experiences the symptoms differently. So accommodations should be made on an individual basis. Find out how to help them cope while they are in school/college.



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