

Sleep Apnea

Sleep

Sleep is very important. It affects your physical and mental health. Sleep is a time for your body to rejuvenate. Too little sleep can create a “sleep debt.” If the debt becomes too great, you can have daytime sleepiness.

Lack of sleep can decrease your:

- performance
- concentration
- reaction time.

Lack of sleep can increase your:

- memory lapses
- accidents and injuries
- behavior problems
- mood problems
- physical symptoms (such as headaches).

Sleep Apnea

Sleep apnea is a common sleep disorder in which you stop breathing while asleep. Your windpipe narrows (collapses) during breathing, blocking air flow.

When this happens, your lungs can't take in oxygen or breathe out carbon dioxide.

Your brain responds to the falling oxygen levels by waking you enough to tighten the upper airway muscles and open your windpipe. You may snort or gasp and continue snoring. This can happen more than 100 times per hour each night.

There are two types of sleep apnea:

- central: occurs when the brain doesn't send the right signals to your breathing muscles
- obstructive: occurs when air cannot flow into or out of your nose or mouth. This is the most common type of sleep apnea.

Apnea is a Greek word meaning “want of breath.”

Causes of Sleep Apnea

Causes of sleep apnea include:

- having a small jaw, or large tongue, tonsils or adenoids
- having throat muscles, a tongue and uvula (the small fleshy tissue that hangs from the back of the throat) that relax more than normal
- taking alcohol, sleeping pills or other medicine before bedtime (This can slow your breathing and can cause the apnea to occur more often.)
- being overweight
- having high blood pressure.

(over)

Risk for Sleep Apnea

Sleep apnea affects about 18 million Americans. Studies show it is more common in men than in women.

Symptoms of Sleep Apnea

Common symptoms include:

- loud snoring
- choking or gasping during sleep
- daytime sleepiness (even while driving or working).

Not everyone who snores has sleep apnea, but people who have sleep apnea usually snore.

Other symptoms may include:

- morning headaches
- memory or learning problems
- feeling irritable
- inability to concentrate
- mood or personality changes
- dry throat in the morning.

These symptoms may appear in medical conditions other than sleep apnea. You may want to talk to your doctor about your symptoms.

If sleep apnea is not treated, it can lead to high blood pressure, heart disease, heart attack, stroke, impotence, memory loss and death (because of accidents while driving or working).

How Sleep Apnea is Found

To help diagnose sleep apnea, your health care provider may:

- ask you about your medical history
- ask questions about how you sleep and feel during the day
- check your mouth, nose and throat for obstruction

- ask you to have a sleep study (polysomnography). While you sleep, the sleep center staff monitors your stages of sleep, brain activity, muscle activity, eye movement, breathing, heart rate and blood oxygen levels.

Diagnosis of sleep apnea is not simple. There can be many reasons for disturbed sleep.

Treatment of Sleep Apnea

Sleep apnea treatment is based on the results of your sleep study and your medical and sleep history. Treatment may include:

- losing weight if you are overweight
- avoiding alcohol, caffeine and/or smoking
- reviewing your medicine list (Medicines for headaches, anxiety and other common problems may affect your sleep and breathing.)
- sleeping on your side, rather than your back
- using a mouthpiece (oral appliance) during sleep (This will adjust your lower jaw and tongue forward, opening the space in the back of the throat.)
- using a continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) machine while sleeping (This machine blows air into your throat to keep your airway open. The air pressure is adjusted to your need.)
- having surgery to enlarge your airway.

Medicines usually do not work in treating sleep apnea.

You and your health care provider will decide on the best treatment plan for you.

**Adapted from the
National Institutes of Health.**