

Sleep Apnea

We spend almost one-third of our life sleeping. Sufficient and restful sleep plays a critical role in our emotional and physical well-being. One of the most prevalent forms of sleep disorders is apnea. With sleep apnea, a sleeper's breathing is actually interrupted for periods of 10 seconds or longer. Such interruptions can occur up to 300 times per night.

Symptoms

Severe snoring and loud breathing are the most common symptoms of apnea. During sleep, the muscles at the base of the throat relax and block the air passage, resulting in a loud, guttural noise as the sleeper breathes.

Beyond the standard symptoms of snoring and breath interruption, there are several other signs which, in combination, may indicate you have apnea:

- Waking frequently during the night (the sleeper will usually not remember waking)
- Gaining weight
- Experiencing memory loss
- Having headaches in the morning
- Feeling not rested in the morning despite sleeping for 8-10 hours the night before
- Demonstrating poor judgment during the day
- Exhibiting personality changes

An estimated 18 to 25 million Americans suffer from sleep apnea. However, fewer than 1 million of those affected are aware they even have the disorder.

What Causes Apnea

There is some evidence that apnea is hereditary. This may be due to inherited physical traits of the face and neck that cause breathing abnormalities. Obesity is another factor. Being seriously overweight can cause a narrowing of the air passage due to excess tissue.

How you sleep can also contribute to apnea. The obvious problem is when you sleep on your back. Not only can obesity or other physical traits come into play, but gravity itself can also cause the throat to narrow. Smoking and alcohol use may be associated with sleep apnea.

Complications

Unlike simple snoring, which is merely annoying, sleep apnea can have several health consequences. The obstructed breathing that occurs with apnea can cause disturbances in the sleep cycle. During the

blockages, oxygen levels are reduced and carbon dioxide increases to the point the brain alerts the body to "wake up" and start breathing. Sleepers with apnea, therefore, do not reach the deeper stages of sleep needed to refresh themselves physically and psychologically. In addition, apnea can cause fluctuations in a sufferer's blood pressure, which can lead to hypertension.

Apnea sufferers may find it tough to stay awake during the day because their sleep is so interrupted. Their concentration and ability to function can also be impaired, placing them at risk for accidents (from stumbling over furniture to car crashes due to falling asleep at the wheel). Other health risks include high blood pressure, irregular heartbeat and strokes.

What to Do

If you suspect you have sleep apnea, you should see a doctor for a physical exam. You can help your doctor diagnose apnea by keeping a sleep diary and keep a record that includes:

- When you feel sleepy during the day
- When you experience morning headaches
- When you have periods of sleeplessness
- The position in which you slept
- Other information related to your sleep

The doctor will also check the back of your mouth and throat for physical abnormalities. Your doctor may recommend further testing such as a polysomnography, which measures several body functions during sleep. This procedure must be conducted in a sleep lab.

Treatment

Treatment for sleep apnea can depend on the severity of the disorder. The goal of treatment is to provide better sleep, which will allow a sufferer to sleep more soundly and prevent heart disease that results from constant fluctuations in blood pressure. Treatments for sleep apnea include:

- **Changing your sleep habits.** If you sleep on your back, try switching to your side. A special pillow that supports your neck and makes it comfortable to sleep on your side may help.
- **Losing weight.** For apnea sufferers who are obese, losing weight can reduce snoring. Less snoring can mean better sleep and reduced fatigue during the day. Your physician should supervise any weight loss program.
- **Wearing nasal strips.** These strips can keep your nasal passages clearer, which can help reduce snoring.
- **Using a continuous positive airflow pressure device (CPAP).** This bedside machine pumps air through a tube affixed to a mask the sleeper wears over his or her face. The air pressure prevents the collapse of soft tissues in the neck and throat during the night. A doctor must determine the appropriate settings for each patient.
- **Wearing a dental device.** Appliances, similar to sports guards, can hold the tongue in a steady position so it does not block the airway.
- **Having surgery to eliminate physical abnormalities.** Your doctor may recommend an operation to reduce the amount of tissue surrounding the air passages in your throat to stop the effects of apnea.

It is very important that you consult a physician if you experience any of the symptoms of sleep apnea over a period of time. If left untreated, sleep apnea can be life-threatening. Proper diagnosis and treatment are necessary to improve the quality of your sleep and therefore, your health and life.

Resources

For more information about sleep apnea, contact the following organizations:

- American Sleep Apnea Association: www.sleepapnea.org
- National Sleep Foundation: www.sleepfoundation.org
- National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute: www.nhlbi.nih.gov

Here when you need us.

Call: 844-207-5465

Online: guidanceresources.com

App: GuidanceNowSM

Web ID: LivingME

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