

A Wake-Up Call!



**Sleep Apnea is
a Life Threatening Disease**

BY: SALUD+HEALTH INFO MAGAZINE- 2009

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Sleep is essential to good health as it refreshes the body and the mind. Getting the right amount of good quality sleep is important to physical and mental health, and to optimal daily functioning. Not getting enough sleep, or poor sleep due to a sleep disorder, can rob one's energy, reduce mental sharpness, and increase the risk of accidents while driving, or on the job. Symptoms often attributed to stress, aging, existing medical illness and medications.

What is sleep apnea?

Sleep apnea is a serious, debilitating and potentially life-threatening sleep disorder. Obstructive sleep apnea, OSA, is a disorder in which breathing is briefly and repeatedly interrupted during sleep. "Apnea" refers to a breathing pause that lasts at least ten seconds causing fragmented sleep and low blood oxygen levels. The combination of disturbed sleep and oxygen starvation may lead to hypertension, heart disease and mood, and memory problems.

Obstructive sleep apnea, OSA, occurs when the muscles in the back of the throat fail to keep the airway open, despite efforts to breathe. Another form of sleep apnea is central sleep apnea, in which the brain fails to properly control breathing during sleep. Obstructive sleep apnea is far more common than central sleep apnea. However sometimes may be a combination of central and obstructive sleep apnea called Mixed Apnea.

More than 18 million American adults have sleep apnea. Sleep apnea often goes undiagnosed. Doctors usually can't detect the condition during routine office visits. Also, there are no blood tests for the condition. Most people who have sleep apnea don't know they have it because it only occurs during sleep.

If left untreated, sleep apnea can result in a growing number of health problems including: Hypertension, Stroke, Heart failure, irregular heartbeats, and heart attacks. In addition, untreated sleep apnea may be responsible for poor performance in everyday activities, such as at work and school, motor vehicle crashes, as well as academic underachievement in children and adolescents.

Chronic snoring is a strong indicator of sleep apnea and should be evaluated by a health professional. Since people with sleep apnea tend to be sleep deprived, they may suffer from sleeplessness and a wide range of other symptoms such as difficulty concentrating, depression, irritability, sexual dysfunction, learning and memory difficulties, and falling asleep while at work, on the phone, or driving.



Symptoms of sleep apnea can include

Disturbed sleep, excessive sleepiness during the day, high blood pressure, heart attack, congestive heart failure, cardiac arrhythmia, stroke or depression.

WHO is at Risk?

OSA occurs in all age groups and both sexes, the most common cause of OSA in children is enlarged tonsils, but there are a number of factors that increase risk, including having a small upper airway (or large tongue, tonsils or uvula), being overweight, having a recessed chin, small jaw or a large overbite, a large neck size (17 inches or greater in a man, or 16 inches or greater in a woman), smoking and alcohol use, being age 40 or older, and ethnicity (African-Americans, Pacific-Islanders and Hispanics). Also, OSA seems to run in some families, suggesting a possible genetic basis.

Treatment

If you suspect you may have sleep apnea, the first thing to do is see your doctor. One method used to diagnose sleep apnea is a sleep study, which may require an overnight stay at a sleep center. The sleep study monitors a variety of functions during sleep including sleep state, eye movement, muscle activity, heart rate, respiratory effort, airflow, and blood oxygen levels. This test is used both to diagnose sleep apnea and to determine its severity. Once diagnosed the treatment of choice is based depending on the severity of the problem.

Sometimes, treatment can be started during the first night in the sleep center.

One method of treatment is the continuous positive airway pressure device (CPAP). CPAP is a mask that fits over the nose and/or mouth, and gently blows air into the airway to help keep it open during sleep. If you are having problems adjusting your CPAP, or you're experiencing side effects of wearing the appliance, talk to your doctor.

Other method of treating sleep apnea is a mouthpiece, sometimes called dental appliance.

The mouthpiece will adjust your lower jaw and your tongue to help keep your airways open while you sleep. If you use a mouthpiece, it's important that you check with your doctor about discomfort or pain while using the device. You may need periodic office visits so your doctor can adjust your mouthpiece to fit better.

The third method is the surgery of the upper airway soft tissue.

Effective ways of mitigating symptoms and reduce apnea severity is with Lifestyle changes such as:

- Lose weight. If you are overweight, this is the most important action you can take to cure your sleep apnea.
- Avoid alcohol; it causes frequent nighttime awakenings, and makes the upper airway breathing muscles relax.
- Quit smoking. Cigarette smoking worsens swelling in the upper airway, making apnea (and snoring) worse.
- Some patients with mild sleep apnea or heavy snoring have fewer breathing problems by lying on their sides instead of their backs.

Keep in mind that certain store-purchased and prescription sleep aids may impair breathing in OSA patients.

Getting adequate sleep is essential for your body to rest, to maintaining good mood, good health and to keep you up going with your life. If you have symptoms of OSA and/or insomnia such as difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, or waking up un-refreshed, by talking to your doctor about treatment options you could save your life.

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