

PATIENT INFORMATION

SLEEP APNEA

WHAT IS SLEEP APNEA?

People with sleep apnea stop breathing for many seconds at a time while they are sleeping. These short stops in breathing can happen numerous times during the night. These periods of not breathing may interrupt deep sleep. If you are waking up so often during the night, you probably aren't getting enough rest from your sleep.

There are two kinds of sleep apnea--obstructive apnea and central apnea. Obstructive sleep apnea is the most common type. Nine out of 10 patients with sleep apnea have this type of apnea. If you have this type, then your air passage or windpipe that brings air into your body is being blocked when you sleep at night. You keep trying to breathe, but you can't get enough air because of the blockage. Your windpipe might be blocked by your tongue, tonsils or uvula. It might also be blocked by a large amount of fatty tissue in the throat or even by relaxed throat muscles. This may occur and you may not know it's happening.

Central sleep apnea is rare. This type is called central apnea because it is related to the function of the central nervous system (i.e. your brain). If you have this type of apnea, the muscles you use in breathing don't get the "go-ahead" signal from your brain. Either the brain doesn't send the signal, or the signal gets interrupted.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE SLEEP APNEA?

The person you sleep with may notice it first. You, or that person, may notice heavy snoring, long pauses in your breathing, or choking during sleep. You may notice daytime sleepiness (falling asleep at work, while driving or when talking), irritability or fatigue. You may also notice that you have morning headaches, forgetfulness, mood changes and a decreased interest in sex.

If you have symptoms of sleep apnea, your doctor may ask you to go to a sleep center for a sleep study. Tests done at the sleep center may reveal which kind of sleep apnea you have and how severe it is.

IS SLEEP APNEA DANGEROUS?

At first, sleep apnea isn't harmful. However, it can cause serious problems if it isn't treated. Because sleep apnea affects the quality of your sleep, you don't get "good" uninterrupted sleep at night. As a result, this may affect you during the day, making you more tired and sleepier. It can affect your mood and concentration. You might nod off in meetings, when you are relaxing, or more alarming, you might get sleepy when you are driving. You are more likely to have traffic accidents if you drive while you're sleepy.

Even more concerning is your risk of heart disease and stroke is higher if serious apnea goes untreated. Therefore, it is very important for you to get treated for sleep apnea.

IS THERE ANYTHING I CAN DO TO HELP MY SLEEP APNEA?

Yes. These steps help many people with sleep apnea to sleep better:

1. Stop all use of alcohol or sleep medicines.
2. If you are overweight, lose weight.
3. Sleep on your side instead of on your back.
4. Put the head of your bed at a 20-30° angle.

If you still have problems, your doctor may recommend a special mask over your nose and mouth while you are sleeping. The mask will keep your airway open by adding pressure to the air you breathe. The mask helps most people with sleep apnea. In a very few cases, surgery is necessary to remove tonsils or extra tissue in the throat.

IS SLEEP APNEA COMMON?

About 2% of women and 4% of men have sleep apnea. If you are interested in more information or discussing sleep apnea with other people, you can contact the American Sleep Apnea Association, at www.sleepapnea.org, or 2025 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Suite 905, Washington, D.C., 20006, (telephone: 202-293-3650) to find the location of a support group near you.

WILL THIS PROBLEM CHANGE MY LIFE?

Sleep apnea can definitely affect your life. Chances are things will improve for you once the diagnosis is made. If your sleep problem can be solved by not using alcohol or sleep medicine, losing weight if you're overweight, and sleeping on your side, you will quickly begin to feel much more rested and energetic. If you must wear the mask while sleeping, you should soon feel the benefits. If you need surgery, you'll be able to sleep better afterwards. Whatever your treatment, remember that you are not alone and help is available.