

Sleep Apnea

What Is Sleep Apnea?

Sleep apnea is a sleep disorder that causes a person to stop breathing while sleeping. This may occur several times an hour and can last from a few seconds to a few minutes.

There are two kinds of sleep apnea. The most common is called **obstructive sleep apnea**, which occurs when the airway is obstructed. The obstruction is usually the soft tissue in the back of the throat collapsing during sleep.

The less common type is called **central sleep apnea**, which occurs when the respiratory control center in the brain fails to send the correct signals to muscles involved in inhaling and exhaling.

What Are Signs and Symptoms of Sleep Apnea?

Symptoms of sleep apnea include snoring, suddenly waking with a choking sensation, excessive perspiration during sleep, frequent nocturnal urination, waking with a sore and dry throat, confusion upon awakening, morning headaches, daytime sleepiness, difficulty concentrating, low libido, moodiness, depression, heartburn, and insomnia.

This condition is serious and may have some of the following consequences:

- Hypertension (high blood pressure)
- Stroke
- Heart failure
- Impotence

Also, as a result of poor sleep a person may have difficulty with interpersonal relationships, operating machinery or motor vehicles, loss of work productivity, or an increase in accidents.

Doctors diagnose sleep apnea by reviewing medical and family history, performing a physical exam, and reviewing the results of a person's sleep study.

Who Is at Risk for Sleep Apnea?

It is estimated that over 12 million adults in America have obstructive sleep apnea. Over half of this population are obese or overweight. Sleep apnea is more common in men, especially those over 40. Both men and women who have a large neck size (17" or greater for men and 16" or greater for women) are at an increased risk of suffering sleep apnea. People who have smaller airways (throat, nose or mouth), large tonsils, or who have allergies or smoke are also at a greater risk. Family history of sleep apnea increases risk.

How Is Sleep Apnea Treated?

The goal of treating sleep apnea is to restore regular breathing patterns during sleep. Consult with a physician about treatment, which may include:

- Lifestyle changes, such as drinking less alcohol and avoiding medications that cause drowsiness.
- A weight loss program.
- Using nose sprays, and/or mouthpieces that adjust the position of the jaw to assist with keeping airways open.
- Using a C-PAP (Continuous Airway Pressure) machine. A mask over the mouth gently blows air into the throat to keep the airways open.
- Surgery to widen breathing passages.



For more information on sleep apnea see the following websites:

http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/dci/Diseases/SleepApnea/SleepApnea_WhatIs.html

<http://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/sleep-apnea/default.htm>