

Sleep Apnea

What is sleep apnea?

People with sleep apnea stop breathing for at least 10 seconds at a time while they are sleeping. These short stops in breathing can happen up to 400 times every night! The periods of not breathing may make you wake up from deep sleep. If you are waking up so often all night long, you 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 people with sleep apnea have this type of apnea. If you have this type, something is blocking the passage or windpipe, called the trachea, that brings air into your body. 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 (the little piece of flesh that hangs down in the back of your throat). It might also be blocked by a large amount of fatty tissue in the throat or even by relaxed throat muscles.

Central sleep apnea is rare. This type is called central apnea because it is related to the function of the central nervous system. 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?

Your doctor can diagnose sleep apnea. The person you sleep with may notice it first. You, or that person, may notice heavy snoring or long pauses in your breathing during sleep. You may notice daytime sleepiness (falling asleep at work, while driving or when talking), and 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. You may need to take some equipment home with you to do a sleep study at home.

Is sleep apnea dangerous?

At first, sleep apnea isn't harmful. However, it can cause serious problems if it isn't treated. Your risk of heart disease and stroke is higher if serious apnea goes untreated. You are also more likely to have traffic accidents if you drive while you're sleepy. 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:

- Stop all use of alcohol or sleep medicines.
- If you are overweight, lose weight.
- Sleep on your side instead of on your back.

If you still have problems, you can wear 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?

A recent study shows that about 2% of women and 4% of men have sleep apnea. If you are interested in meeting other people with sleep apnea, you can contact the American Sleep Apnea Association, 2025 Pennsylvania Ave. N.W., Suite 905, Washington, DC, 20006 (telephone: 202-293-3650) to find the location of a support group near you.

Will this problem change my life?

Actually, sleep apnea may already have affected you more than you know. 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.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

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