

Sleep Apnea Fact Sheet

What Is Sleep Apnea?

More than 18 million American adults have sleep apnea (AP-ne-ah), a common disorder in which there is one or more pauses in breathing or shallow breaths during sleep. Breathing pauses can last from a few seconds to minutes and often occur 5 to 30 times or more an hour. Typically, normal breathing restarts after the pause, sometimes with a loud snort or choking sound.

Sleep apnea usually is a chronic (ongoing) condition that disrupts sleep. People with this condition often move out of deep sleep and into light sleep when breathing pauses or becomes shallow. This results in poor sleep quality and tiredness during the day. Sleep apnea is one of the leading causes of excessive daytime sleepiness.

Obstructive sleep apnea, or simply sleep apnea, can cause fragmented sleep and low blood oxygen levels. For people with sleep apnea, the combination of disturbed sleep and oxygen starvation may lead to hypertension, heart disease and mood and memory problems. Sleep apnea also increases the risk of automobile crashes. Sleep apnea can be life-threatening and you should consult your doctor immediately if you feel you may suffer from it.

Overview

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. A family member and/or bed partner may first notice the signs of sleep apnea.

The most common type of sleep apnea is obstructive sleep apnea. This most often means that the airway has collapsed or is blocked during sleep. The blockage may cause shallow breathing or breathing pauses.

When one tries to breathe, any air that squeezes past the blockage can cause loud snoring. Obstructive sleep apnea is more common in people who are overweight, but it can affect anyone. For example, small children may have enlarged tonsil tissues in their throats, which can lead to obstructive sleep apnea.

Risk Factors for Sleep Apnea

Sleep apnea occurs in all age groups and both sexes, but there are a number of factors that may lead to higher risk:

- Family history of sleep apnea
- Having a small upper airway
- Being overweight
- Recessed chin, small jaw, large overbite
- Being age 40 or older
- Smoking and alcohol use
- Having a large neck size
- Ethnicity

Symptoms of Sleep Apnea

- Loud snoring
- Morning headaches and nausea
- Gasping or choking while sleeping
- Loss of sex drive/impotence
- Excessive daytime sleepiness
- Irritability and/or feelings of depression
- Disturbed sleep
- Concentration and memory problems
- Frequent nighttime urination

Diagnosing Sleep Apnea

In order to diagnose sleep apnea, a physician will recommend a visit to a sleep disorders center for testing. A sleep study test (polysomnography) will determine a sleep apnea diagnosis and how severe it is. Those diagnosed with sleep apnea benefit from both lifestyle changes and specific medical treatment.

Lifestyle Changes

- **Lose weight** — Overweight persons can help treat their sleep apnea with even moderate weight loss. For instance, a 200-pound man can lose 20 pounds and greatly reduce the number of breathing pauses.
- **Avoid alcohol and sleeping pills** — Both alcohol and sleeping pills slow down breathing and make sleep apnea symptoms worse.
- **Sleep on side or stomach** — Some people suffer from sleep apnea only when lying on their backs.
- **Quit smoking** — Cigarette smoking increases both the risk and the severity of sleep apnea, by causing swelling and excess mucus in the airways and by damaging the lungs.