

Sleep Apnea

There are many different conditions that can cause breathing problems. Asthma, emphysema or pneumonia can make you feel short of breath. Stress may make it hard to breathe and heart disease could make you feel breathless. A stuffy nose or hard exercise might make it seem like you're not getting enough air. But with sleep apnea, you completely stop breathing for seconds or even minutes at a time while you are sleeping.

People with sleep apnea usually don't know they have the condition because it occurs during sleep. While they may partially awaken as they struggle to breathe, they typically will not be aware of the breathing pauses that can occur five to 30 times or more an hour. These sleep interruptions are due to either obstructive sleep apnea, which is the more common form that occurs when throat muscles relax, or central sleep apnea, which happens when the brain doesn't send the right signals to the muscles that control breathing.

People at increased risk for sleep apnea include those who have a neck circumference greater than 17 inches, high blood pressure, a narrowed airway, and a family history of the condition. Other factors that contribute to sleep apnea are prolonged sitting, smoking, using alcohol, sedatives or tranquilizers, and being obese, male or older. African Americans, Hispanics, and Pacific Islanders are more likely to have sleep apnea than Caucasians. Those with the disorder may experience excessive sleepiness during the daytime, loud snoring, waking up with a dry mouth or sore throat, morning headache, problems staying asleep, periods of breathing cessation during sleep, and sudden awakenings with shortness of breath.

The diagnosis of sleep apnea can be based on medical and family histories, a physical exam, or results from sleep studies. Long-term management of sleep apnea is necessary because it is a chronic condition that can increase the risk of work-related accidents, high blood pressure, heart attack, stroke, obesity, diabetes and heart failure. Treatment will focus on restoring regular breathing during sleep and relieving symptoms through lifestyle changes, mouthpieces, breathing devices or surgery.

Lifestyle changes that can help relieve mild sleep apnea include avoiding alcohol and medications that can cause drowsiness, losing weight if overweight, side sleeping, keeping nasal passages open with nasal sprays or allergy medicines, and not smoking. A mouthpiece, or oral appliance, also may be used to adjust the lower jaw and tongue to help keep the airway open during sleep.

Those with moderate to severe sleep apnea may benefit from a continuous positive airway pressure machine that uses a mask fitted over the mouth to gently blow air into the throat while sleeping. Surgery may be another option to widen breathing passages by shrinking, stiffening, or removing excess tissue in the mouth and throat or resetting the lower jaw.

The consequences of untreated sleep apnea can range from higher risks of diabetes and heart disease to dangerously sleepy driving. For more information about sleep apnea, talk with your doctor.