

Understanding Sleep Apnea

What is sleep apnea?

Sleep apnea (also called obstructive sleep apnea) is a serious problem that causes people to briefly stop breathing while they sleep. During normal sleep, throat muscles relax. If there is too little room inside the throat, or too much tissue pressing on the outside of the throat, the airway can become blocked. This blockage stops the movement of air and the amount of oxygen in the blood drops. The drop in oxygen causes the brain to send a signal to wake the person up so that the airway opens and the person starts breathing again. This cycle may repeat as often as 50 or more times an hour. Generally a person will not remember waking up but the many arousals will cause drowsiness the next day.

Who has it?

Sleep apnea affects between 2 to 10 percent of people. It is more common in men than in women. It is also more common in people who are overweight, where the excess body mass causes a narrowing of the airway. Some people also inherit a tendency to have sleep apnea.

Other possible causes of sleep apnea include:

- Tobacco smoking
- Drinking excessive amounts of alcohol
- Lung disease
- An abnormal sleep pattern because of an irregular work schedule or rotating shift work.

What are the symptoms of sleep apnea?

- Loud snoring interrupted with pauses in breathing, followed by loud gasps
- Not feeling rested in the morning
- Morning headaches
- Tiredness or sleepiness during the day
- Trouble concentrating
- Anxiety, irritability, or depression
- A strong desire to take afternoon naps
- Sleepiness while driving.

Many people who snore do not have sleep apnea, but nearly everyone who has sleep apnea snores. If snoring is inhibiting restful sleep, medical attention should be sought.

How is it diagnosed?

To diagnose sleep apnea, a health care provider may:

- Assess you and your family's health history.
- Perform a physical exam, focusing on the throat and nasal passages.
- Order blood tests, including a check of the function of the thyroid gland.
- Do a sleep study at a sleep disorders clinic or sleep lab. Sleep studies are in-depth, inpatient tests that measure a subject's heart rate, brain waves, chest movement, and blood oxygen levels while sleeping. The study will help determine if the movement of air slows during sleep or if air movement stops completely during sleep. It will also show how often this happens during sleep.

How is sleep apnea treated?

The most common treatment for sleep apnea is continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP). This treatment uses a machine to send pressurized air into the nose and throat at night. The amount of pressure is determined through a sleep study. The use of this breathing machine is carefully supervised by the health care provider who will make any adjustments that may be needed.

If sleep apnea is caused by pressure from excess fatty tissue in the throat, a health care provider may suggest a weight loss program. If exhaustion and lack of energy make exercise a challenge for patients, the weight loss program may be supplemented by CPAP. This will allow the patient to rest well enough so that changes can be made in the diet, and physical activity can increase.

Surgery may be an option for people who can't use the breathing machine regularly and properly. A surgical treatment might include changing the position of the air passage in the nose or removing the tonsils.

Other possible treatments currently being studied include:

- Medicines that change the brain chemistry and help muscle tone increase during sleep
- Pacemakers that sense when blockages are occurring and stimulate throat muscles to open up the throat before a person wakes up.

It is very important to treat sleep apnea. Untreated sleep apnea can have very serious long-term effects on a person's health, including increased risk of high blood pressure, heart attacks, and sudden death. Effective treatment of sleep apnea may result in normal blood pressure, relief of fatigue, and weight loss.

How long will the effects last?

Sleep apnea can be cured if it is caused by a reversible problem, such as being overweight or something that can be corrected with surgery. For most people, however, sleep apnea will always be a problem and the CPAP machine will need to be used regularly to get good quality sleep and to prevent the serious complications of sleep apnea.

How can I reduce my chances of developing sleep apnea?

- Maintain an appropriate weight
- Exercise (according to the health care provider's recommendations)
- Practice good sleeping habits
- Stop smoking
- Avoid excessive alcohol consumption

More information about sleep apnea

A patient's own lung specialist is the best source for information about sleep apnea.

Other sources include:

The American Lung Association
www.lungusa.org

National Institutes of Health, National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute
www.nhlbi.nih.gov

American Academy of Sleep Medicine
www.aasmnet.org

Contact Us

For more information/question or comment about Pneumonia
Contact us at info@thelungcenter.co.in