

Feeling sleepy?

Are you tired all the time? Do you find yourself fighting sleep during meetings or on your commute? Do you nod off whenever you have a quiet moment? Sleep apnea may be the cause.¹

Sleep apnea is a common problem – afflicting more than one in every 25 Americans, from children to the elderly.¹

There are three types, and all require treatment in order to avoid serious health complications.²

What is it?

In the case of **obstructive sleep apnea (OSA)**, the muscles supporting your soft palate, uvula, tonsils and tongue relax, causing your airway to narrow or close. Your breathing briefly stops, and you're roused from slumber. While you might awaken feeling short of breath for a few seconds, usually people with OSA are unaware that their sleep was disturbed. This cycle can repeat itself hundreds of times per night, preventing people with OSA from reaching the deep-sleep phases that make us feel well-rested.²

Central sleep apnea is far less common and is usually caused by heart disease or stroke. With central sleep apnea, the brain fails to signal the muscles controlling breathing. A person may have trouble falling or staying asleep, wake up with shortness of breath and be more likely to remember awakening.²

People with **complex sleep apnea** have upper airway obstruction, as well as trouble coordinating the rhythm of their breathing.²

Complications

With sleep apnea, your airflow slows or stops many times per night, resulting in dangerously low oxygen levels. Frequent drops in oxygen levels and poor-quality sleep trigger the release of stress hormones, which raise your heart rate, increase your blood pressure and raise your risk for cardiovascular problems.¹ The risk of high blood pressure for people with OSA is two to three times higher, and the risk increases with the severity of apnea.²

For people who already have heart disease, repeated drops in blood oxygen levels can cause sudden death from a cardiac event.² OSA also increases the risk of heart attack, stroke, heart failure and irregular heartbeat.¹

Sleep apnea is dangerous to your emotional health, too. Drowsiness and difficulty concentrating, memory and learning problems, irritability, moodiness and depression can disrupt your waking hours. Loud snoring – a common sign of sleep apnea – can disturb the sleep of the people around you, potentially leading to relationship problems. Children with untreated sleep apnea are often diagnosed with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and may struggle academically.^{1,2}





Did you know?

People with obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) are more likely to experience complications from general anesthesia and certain medications.² If you're having surgery, remind your surgeon and nurses that you have OSA.

Treatment

Fortunately, there are many treatment options available for sleep apnea. Losing weight, avoiding alcohol and sleeping pills, quitting smoking and avoiding sleeping on your back will help. Other treatments include:³

Continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP), in which a mask worn over your nose and mouth delivers a continuous flow of air into your nostrils while you sleep. This provides enough pressure to keep the airways open.

Dental devices designed to keep the airways open, made by dentists with expertise in treating sleep apnea.

Surgery to correct any physiological problems contributing to sleep apnea, such as enlarged tonsils or a small lower jaw with an overbite.

Symptoms of sleep apnea^{1,2,3}

- Loud snoring
- Daytime sleepiness
- Dropping off to sleep whenever you're not active
- Morning headaches
- Inability to concentrate
- Memory problems
- Irritability, moodiness and depression
- Dry or sore throat when you wake up
- Need to urinate at night
- Difficulty staying asleep
- Waking during the night with a choking or gasping sensation
- Diminished sex drive or impotence

Children with sleep apnea can seem hyperactive and aggressive. They may have unusual sleeping positions and trouble with bedwetting, and they might breathe through their mouths instead of their noses during the day.

Sources

¹ National Heart Lung and Blood Institute, Sleep Apnea (May 2009): nhlbi.nih.gov

² MayoClinic.com, Sleep Apnea (June 28, 2008): mayoclinic.com

³ WebMD, Sleep Apnea Health Center (September 20, 2009): webmd.com