

What Is Sleep Apnea?

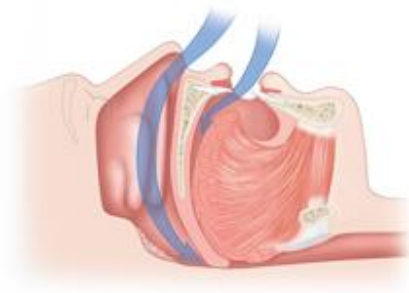
Sleep apnea (AP-ne-ah) is a common disorder in which you have one or more pauses in breathing or shallow breaths while you sleep. Breathing pauses can last from a few seconds to minutes. They may occur 30 times or more an hour.

Typically, normal breathing then starts again, sometimes with a loud snort or choking sound. Sleep apnea usually is a chronic (ongoing) condition that disrupts your sleep. When your breathing pauses or becomes shallow, you'll often move out of deep sleep and into light sleep. As a result, the quality of your sleep is poor, which makes you tired during the day. Sleep apnea is a leading cause of excessive daytime sleepiness.

Overview

Sleep apnea often goes undiagnosed. Doctors usually can't detect the condition during routine office visits. Also, no blood test can help diagnose the condition. Most people who have sleep apnea don't know they have it because it only occurs during sleep. A family member or bed partner might be the first to notice signs of sleep apnea.

The most common type of sleep apnea is obstructive sleep apnea. In this condition, the airway collapses or becomes blocked during sleep. This causes shallow breathing or breathing pauses. When you try 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 who have enlarged tonsil tissues in their throats may have obstructive sleep apnea.



Air is blocked in the back of the mouth and throat.

Central sleep apnea is a less common type of sleep apnea. This disorder occurs if the area of your brain that controls your breathing doesn't send the correct signals to your breathing muscles. As a result, you'll make no effort to breathe for brief periods.

Central sleep apnea can affect anyone. However, it's more common in people who have certain medical conditions or use certain medicines. Central sleep apnea can occur with obstructive sleep apnea or alone. Snoring typically doesn't happen with central sleep apnea.

Outlook

Untreated sleep apnea can:

- Increase the risk of high blood pressure, heart attack, stroke, obesity, and diabetes
- Increase the risk of, or worsen, heart failure
- Make arrhythmias (ah-RITH-me-ahs), or irregular heartbeats, more likely
- Increase the chance of having work-related or driving accidents

Sleep apnea is a chronic condition that requires long-term management. Lifestyle changes, mouthpieces, surgery, and breathing devices can successfully treat sleep apnea in many people.

Who Is at Risk for Sleep Apnea?

Obstructive sleep apnea is a common condition. About half of the people who have this condition are overweight. Men are more likely than women to have sleep apnea. Although the condition can occur at any age, the risk increases as you get older. A family history of sleep apnea also increases your risk for the condition.

People who have small airways in their noses, throats, or mouths are more likely to have sleep apnea. Small airways might be due to the shape of these structures or allergies or other conditions that cause congestion.

About half of the people who have sleep apnea also have high blood pressure. Sleep apnea also is linked to smoking, metabolic syndrome, diabetes, and risk factors for stroke and heart failure. Race and ethnicity might play a role in the risk of developing sleep apnea. However, more research is needed.

Major Signs and Symptoms

One of the most common signs of obstructive sleep apnea is loud and chronic (ongoing) snoring. Pauses may occur in the snoring. Choking or gasping may follow the pauses. The snoring usually is loudest when you sleep on your back; it might be less noisy when you turn on your side. You might not snore every night. Over time, however, the snoring can happen more often and get louder.

You're asleep when the snoring or gasping happens. You likely won't know that you're having problems breathing or be able to judge how severe the problem is. A family member or bed partner often will notice these problems before you do. **Not everyone who snores has sleep apnea.**

Another common sign of sleep apnea is fighting sleepiness during the day, at work, or while driving. You may find yourself rapidly falling asleep during the quiet moments of the day when you're not active. Even if you don't have daytime sleepiness, talk with your doctor if you have problems breathing during sleep.

Other Signs and Symptoms

Others signs and symptoms of sleep apnea include:

- Morning headaches
- Memory or learning problems and not being able to concentrate
- Feeling irritable, depressed, or having mood swings or personality changes
- Waking up frequently to urinate
- Dry mouth or sore throat when you wake up

How Is Sleep Apnea Treated?

Sleep apnea is treated with lifestyle changes, mouthpieces, breathing devices, and surgery. Medicines typically aren't used to treat the condition.

The goals of treating sleep apnea are to:

- Restore regular breathing during sleep
- Relieve symptoms such as loud snoring and daytime sleepiness

Treatment may improve other medical problems linked to sleep apnea, such as high blood pressure. Treatment also can reduce your risk for heart disease, stroke, and diabetes.

If you have sleep apnea, talk with your doctor or sleep specialist about the treatment options that will work best for you. Lifestyle changes and/or mouthpieces may relieve mild sleep apnea. People who have moderate or severe sleep apnea may need breathing devices or surgery.

