

Sleep Apnea Can Go Undetected



The American Academy of Sleep Medicine estimates that obstructive sleep apnea affects more than 12 million Americans and that 1 in 10 people over the age of 65 suffers from it. Many individuals who snore have the disorder and don't even know it, yet sleep apnea is the number one cause of death due to heart failure during sleep.

Individuals with obstructive sleep apnea literally stop breathing when the muscles in the back of the throat, which support the soft palate, uvula, tonsils and tongue, relax. The soft tissues then collapse and close the airway, causing oxygen levels to drop and carbon dioxide to rise. The brain senses this and rouses you from sleep to breathe. This awakening is usually so brief that you don't remember it, but it can happen as frequently as every minute or two and continue all night long. And, each time it happens, it causes a strain on your heart.

Along with increased risk for heart attack and stroke, sleep apnea can result in high blood pressure, memory loss, diabetes, impotence, weight gain, depression, impaired mental functioning and delayed reaction times. Studies have shown that sleep apnea is responsible for many of the fatal motor vehicle accidents that occur in the US each year.

Sleep Apnea Treatments

The American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommends a technology called CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure). CPAP uses an air compressor and mask to force air into the airway, overcoming the obstruction by supplying positive pressure. This is the industry standard and the treatment most often prescribed by doctors. Dr. Iwona Rawinis, medical director of New Island Hospital Sleep Center in Bethpage, and a Board Certified Sleep Specialist, calls CPAP "the first line of treatment."

"It's the best and least invasive," she said. "We always try to do that first, because it's reliable." She also pointed out that insurance companies will generally pay for CPAP treatment, but not for some of the alternatives. You need to check with your individual health plan.

But CPAP is not for everyone. Some people find the device cumbersome and even claustrophobic. For these individuals there are alternatives including surgery which might mean trimming of the soft tissues at back of the throat which can be done with a laser, radio frequency surgery to shrink the tongue or tissues, even surgically remodeling the jaw.

Another approach is the use of oral appliances which keep the airway open. Dr. Pankaj Singh practices at Arch-dental in Manhattan, Garden City and Huntington. He is editor of the Journal of Oral Implantology and the author of several books on the subject. Dr. Singh helped pioneer a device that was "the first to show, on a CAT scan, improvement of the airway by providing 2- 3 times more opening." The device prevents the tongue from falling back over the airway by pushing the lower jaw forward.

Dr. Singh says that for people who cannot tolerate the CPAP, oral appliances are a viable alternative. Oral appliances are typically more effective for people with mild sleep apnea and for non-obese people but can be effective even for moderate and severe sleep apnea. "It works in pretty much all cases," he said, "and most people find it comfortable."

- Greg Burt