

## What is *Sleep Apnea*?

For some, breathing during sleep is a struggle. Unfortunately, most people are completely unaware of their breathing difficulties. A condition called Obstructive Sleep Apnea may exist to cause a narrowing or blockage in the breathing tube. Sleep Apnea may include pauses in breathing or shallow breaths. These abnormal breaths may last from a few seconds to more than a minute and occur throughout sleeping.

With obstructed breathing people try to breathe, but because of the narrowed opening not enough air comes into the lungs. Breathing becomes more labored in an effort to bring in the needed oxygen. Usually, the increased effort to breathe causes people to arouse from sleep for a brief time and then the cycle of breathing problems repeats. Because of the frequent arousals from sleep, people wake in the morning and feel unrefreshed and tired. People may feel rested initially, but within an hour or two of waking feel very tired. Sleep Apnea can be caused by several problems:

- **The size of the breathing tube, and throat area may be small**
- **Throat and tongue muscles relax and narrow the breathing space**
- **Increased body weight may reduce the airway's ability to react to the narrowed opening**
- **Increased age can change how the brain responds to breathing problems or the timing of breathing**

During the struggle to breathe the body sometimes does not get enough oxygen because the breathing tube is blocked or from pauses in breathing. Decreases in the body's oxygen level can cause serious health problems. Frequent decreases of oxygen levels can cause stress hormones to be released raising heart rates causing increased blood pressure and irregular heartbeats.

### ***What Are the Symptoms of Sleep Apnea?***

People who have sleep apnea may not be aware of their condition. In fact, many people who arrive in our Sleep Center were first made aware of a problem from someone who has listened to their breathing during sleep, heard snoring, or observed some of the signs of Sleep Apnea. Snoring is often the first complaint from others since it is often disturbing to their sleep and easily noticeable.

Problems in the sinuses and airway spaces can cause snoring and may contribute to worsening breathing problems. However, not everyone who snores has a breathing disorder like Sleep Apnea. Some people who have obstructive breathing may not snore at all. Here is a list of some of the more common symptoms of Sleep Apnea:

- **Obesity**
- **High blood pressure**
- **Excessively sleepy during the day**
- **Snoring**
- **Gasping, coughing, choking during sleep**
- **Falling asleep at times not planned such as driving or work**
- **Morning headaches**
- **Frequent trips to urinate at night**
- **Difficulty with concentrating or memory**
- **Problems with irritability, anxiousness, or feeling depressed**
- **Difficulty staying awake when driving**
- **Sexual dysfunctions, loss of interest or impotence**
- **Poor sleep habits**
- **Problems staying asleep**

### ***How Do People Know When to Seek Help for a Breathing Problem?***

Most people seek answers when some part of their everyday life becomes more difficult. Problems can be from family members, friends, social life, work, school, or any activity. Anyone can have some symptoms described above, but when several of these symptoms occur over a period of time causing problems with daily living; then it is time to seek help.

The first place to seek help is with your primary physician or sleep specialist. During your appointment describe the symptoms you are having and how it is affecting your life. The physician may ask you to fill out a questionnaire to help them understand the problem. Your primary physician may want you to see a sleep specialist who is trained to recognize and treat sleep disorders.

In some cases your physician will order sleep testing called Polysomnography. Sleep testing is the best method of determining if there is a sleep related breathing disorder. The sleep testing is performed in a facility with equipment needed to record sleep stages, breathing, oxygen levels, heart rates, limb movements, and audio and video recording. The sleep testing usually only takes one night (or day depending on sleep times). Sleep facilities record and evaluate the information and send reports and recordings to the sleep specialist for review and interpretation. If it is determined Sleep Apnea exists another overnight sleep test may be needed to treat the problem.

### ***What Happens If I Have Sleep Apnea? How Is It Treated?***

Fortunately, Sleep Apnea is treatable and treatment can improve sleep quality. Because Sleep Apnea is often caused from tissue blocking the airway, a device is used to help keep the breathing space open using air pressure. The device is called Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP), and generates enough air flow to create pressure in the breathing tube to keep tissue from blocking your breathing. The CPAP device actually improves your sleep by reducing breathing effort, getting adequate oxygen, and reducing arousals in sleep. CPAP is an air pump device set at a certain pressure or range of pressures, and maintains that level during sleep. A person wears a mask over the nose, connected to a tube and the CPAP machine. Since use of the CPAP device requires wearing something on the face it may take some time to become adjusted to it.

Other treatment options for treating sleep related breathing disorders include oral appliances, similar in appearance to mouth guards used in sports. These oral devices attempt to keep the airway open by bringing the tongue forward and increasing the airway space. Oral appliances are recommended for snoring or when mild sleep apnea is a concern. Another treatment option is surgery to open up the breathing space. Extra tissue, uvula, and the palate can be altered to increase the airway space.

Most people choose to use the CPAP device since it is without the possible complications and risks of surgery, and more effective in moderate to severe sleep apnea than oral appliances. If treatment with a CPAP device is chosen,

then a home care company is selected to provide the CPAP and instruction on use. Home care companies provide technical support and supplies.

Most people will need to use the CPAP machine throughout their lives. Sleep disordered breathing can become worse as we age or with weight gain. It is important to remember use of a CPAP machine not only improves the quality of life but overall health as well. Once people become accustomed to the CPAP device most people want to wear it every night. Some individuals who have mild Sleep Apnea and lose weight may not require CPAP. However, because sleep apnea can occur due to several problems of the airway, losing weight may not result in a change of condition or treatment.

### ***How Can I Improve My Condition?***

Following the physician's treatment plan with CPAP use and staying in contact with your home care company provides the best start to successful treatment. Following a healthy lifestyle such as eating nutritious foods, weight loss (or maintaining healthy weight), and regular exercise can add to improved sleep quality.

### ***What If I Still Have Sleeping Problems and Do Not Feel Rested?***

People can have additional sleep disorders not related to breathing. A common condition called Period Limb Movement Disorder (PLMD) results from frequent movements of the legs (or arms) and occurs during sleep. The movements can be slight but cause disturbances in sleep. Other problems can exist like seizure activity, narcolepsy, insomnia, and sleep timing problems. Certain medications can affect your sleep so be aware of any medications you take and their side effects. Over-the-counter medications may also have a negative impact on your sleep. Caffeine intake can make sleep quality poor. Eating too close to bed time may cause reflux and disturbed sleep. Medical conditions such as arthritis, fibromyalgia, chronic breathing problems such as emphysema and asthma may also cause poor sleep. Consult your primary physician or sleep specialist if you are having continued symptoms or difficulties with sleeping.

For more information on improving  
your sleep, please call **402-219-8742**.

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