

YOUR GOOD HEALTH

Sleep apnea Condition linked to wide range of serious health issues

By Fred R. Savana
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The minute she sat down to watch television or climbed into the passenger seat of a car, Doreen Henry would nod off. Her husband, Michael, was much the same, heading for the couch and a nap as soon as he got home from work.

"I was always tired, I had memory loss and high blood pressure," said Doreen, who is 51 and lives with Michael, 50.

Sleep studies with Doylestown (Pennsylvania) Health's Sleep Center found each of the Henrys had sleep apnea, a potentially dangerous condition that restricts the airway and stops breathing for several seconds, sometimes hundreds of times throughout the night. The interrupted sleep can lead to an array of health problems, from severe daytime fatigue to heart and liver ailments, sexual dysfunction and sleep-deprived partners.

Dr. Les Szekely, the sleep center's director, prescribed CPAP machines to the couple. (Doreen got hers several years ago; Michael, a few months ago.) "Within two days of using it, I felt so much better," Doreen said. "I won't go anywhere without it, no way."

CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) masks use air to open the airway passage and deliver oxygen to the lungs. The device fits securely over the mouth and/or nose. By opening the passage, the apneic episode is prevented, allowing deep sleep to continue uninterrupted. "It's tolerated by about 80 percent" of patients, said the Doylestown Health sleep specialist. CPAP is the only sleep apnea treatment universally paid for by insurance, added Szekely.

Population studies suggest 8 percent to 10 percent of men and 4 percent to 5 percent of women in the United States have the disorder, with upwards of 80 percent yet to be diagnosed, according to the doctor.

Obstructive sleep apnea, the most common form of the affliction, is typically marked by loud snoring, awakening with a dry mouth or sore throat, morning headache, difficulty staying asleep, attention problems and irritability. The constriction begins when the throat muscles supporting the soft palate, the uvula (that triangular piece of tissue hanging from the soft palate), the tonsils, the side walls of the throat and the tongue all relax during sleep.

It's that relaxation that narrows and momentarily closes the airway, suppress-

Sleep apnea's effects on the body

Sleep apnea is a condition in which one's breathing pauses during sleep. When experiencing apnea, the body wakes a person up to resume breathing. When sleeping is frequently interrupted it prevents deep, quality sleep. Not only does sleep apnea leave a person especially tired, it can lead to serious health consequences if left untreated.

Circulatory system

Congestive heart failure (newly diagnosed patients should be evaluated for sleep apnea)

Cardiac arrhythmias

Mood disturbances
Depression, anxiety, shortened attention span, loss of motivation.

Sexual dysfunction

Loss of libido, impotence.

Chronic pain

Up to 80 percent of patients with fibromyalgia have sleep apnea. Seventy-five percent of patients treated with moderate to high doses of opioids have sleep apnea.

Other health risks

Cancer: Those with severe forms of sleep apnea have a 65 percent greater risk of developing cancer.

Sudden death: Sleep apnea sufferers have a 30 percent higher risk of heart attack or premature death. More than 50 percent of sudden deaths from OSA occur between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.

Drug-resistant hypertension: Sleep apnea is an identifiable cause of high blood pressure.

Obesity: As sleep shortens or diminishes in quality, appetite for high-calorie food increases. Approximately 80 percent of sleep apnea patients are overweight.

Source: Dr. Les Szekely, director of Doylestown Health's Sleep Center

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ing the flow of air into the lungs. The brain senses the inability to breathe and rouses one from sleep so breathing can start again. The awakening is usually so quick, it's not even remembered. But, experts agree, the episodes take a toll on an individual's health.

During these sleep apnea events, oxygen levels in the blood can be reduced, at times to dangerously low levels, said Dr. Arvind Cavale, an endocrinologist in Yardley, Pennsylvania, who has been studying the relationship between sleep apnea and diabetes for about 15 years. Untreated, sleep apnea can have long-term health consequences, including progression of diabetes, as apnea can create "a wild ride in glucose levels," the doctor said.

Michelle Rothstein said sleep apnea played a role in the death of her husband, David, two and a half years ago.

"I knew he had it," she said before he was later diagnosed. Still, he wouldn't wear the mask consistently. "It was uncomfortable and noisy," she said. "He also wouldn't admit he had it."

David Rothstein had spent much of his life overweight, frequently a major risk factor in sleep apnea. He also had lived most of his life unaware of a heart defect he had since birth, explained his widow. While he died of a heart attack shortly after surgery to repair the defect, his wife said sleep apnea "greatly contributed" to his heart's damage.

She encourages others not to ignore the condition. "Sleep apnea is more serious than you know," she said. "Have it treated. It can be a matter of life and death."

Anyone, including children, can have sleep apnea. But certain factors increase the risk. They include excess weight, those with

3 main types of sleep apnea

1. Obstructive sleep apnea: the more common form that occurs when throat muscles relax.

2. Central sleep apnea: occurs when the brain doesn't send proper signals to the muscles that control breathing.

3. Complex sleep apnea syndrome: also known as treatment-emergent central sleep apnea. Occurs when someone has both obstructive and central sleep apneas.

Symptoms

- Loud snoring
- Breathing cessation during sleep, witnessed by another person
- Abrupt waking accompanied by shortness of breath
- Waking with a dry mouth or sore throat
- Morning headache
- Difficulty staying asleep
- Excessive daytime sleepiness
- Attention problems
- Irritability

When to see a doctor

Consult a medical professional if you experience or if your partner notices:

- Snoring loud enough to disturb the sleep of another
- Shortness of breath, gasping for air or choking the wakes you from sleep
- Intermittent pauses in your breathing during sleep
- Excessive daytime drowsiness, which may cause you to fall asleep while working, watching TV or even driving

Source: The Mayo Clinic

thicker necks, a narrowed airway, being male, being older, family history, use of alcohol, sedatives or tranquilizers, smoking and nasal congestion, according to the Mayo Clinic.

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