

SLEEP APNEA

We take breathing for granted. We breathe automatically. The pattern of our breathing changes often throughout the day and night, varying with our body's needs. These natural changes can become disrupted in some individuals causing them to breathe abnormally during sleep. As a result the body's functions become altered and the normal stages of sleep disturbed. As a result the person awakes tired and experiences sleepiness during the day.

SLEEP APNEA: Apnea means "absence of breathing". A person's breathing changes with the stage and depth of their sleep. Some may stop breathing for a short time, maybe as often as several times each hour. If these episodes become more frequent with longer duration, they may cause the body's oxygen level to decrease and disrupt sleep.

As sleep is disturbed night after night, the person may become more sleepy during the day and this may lead to irritability, memory lapses inattention and personality changes. Many of us have experienced the sluggish feeling due to a night of poor sleep, resulting in poor performance at school or work.

Periods of apnea also affects other organs and causes them to function abnormally. The function of the heart may be altered and may contribute to high blood pressure and risk of stroke. It may even cause disturbances in the rhythm of the heart.

There are two types of SLEEP APNEA:

OBSTRUCTIVE: The breathing is blocked by temporary obstruction of the main airway. It often occurs because the tongue and throat muscles relax. The muscles of the chest and diaphragm continue to work, but there is no air flow. After a short interval (seconds to minutes), breathing efforts become more vigorous and eventually opens the airway again. This usually occurs with a loud snort and jerking of the body, causing the person to arouse from sleep. This may recur over and over through the night. Most of these people are snorers.

CENTRAL: Less common. There is a disturbance in the area of the brain that controls breathing. These patients will not experience the body jerk and snort but will merely start re-breathing on their own. They may also be disturbed from sleep by low blood oxygen levels.

DIAGNOSIS: By recognition of symptoms. Family or spouse may notice them falling asleep when watching TV, or when not actively stimulated. Sleep problems are often aggravated by alcohol or sedative medications. Evaluation and diagnosis by a visit to a sleep lab (polysomnogram) study

TREATMENT: Improvement may sometimes be obtained by developing better sleep habits and avoiding alcohol and sedatives at bedtime. Weight loss can be helpful for those who are obese. In some cases Continuous Positive Airway Pressure therapy may be necessary. The person wears a mask which creates continuous air pressure in the throat and prevents obstruction from occurring.