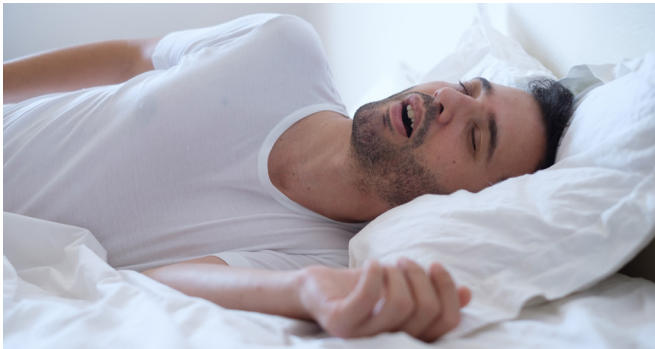


UNDERSTANDING THE SIGNS OF SLEEP APNEA

Sleep apnea is a serious, potentially life-threatening sleep disorder that affects approximately 22 million Americans. It owes its name to the Greek word apnea (meaning “want of breath”) and refers to episodes in which a person stops breathing for short periods of time during sleep.



With each episode, the sleeper’s brain briefly wakes up in order to resume breathing, resulting in extremely fragmented and poor-quality sleep. If you or your dentist suspects you suffer from sleep apnea, or if you have been diagnosed with sleep apnea, your dentist can work closely with your physician to implement and manage a prescribed therapy.

What are the major types of sleep apnea?

There are three major types of sleep apnea, all of which can severely disrupt the regular sleep cycle:

- **Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA):** As you sleep, the muscles in the walls of your throat relax to the point where the airway collapses and prevents air from flowing into your nose and mouth, but efforts to breathe continue. This is the most common type of apnea. OSA affects people of any age, but it is most frequently seen in men older than 40, especially those who are overweight or obese, according to the American Sleep Apnea Association – which reports that 80 percent of the cases of moderate and severe OSA are undiagnosed.
- **Central sleep apnea:** Breathing interruptions during sleep are caused by problems with the brain mechanisms that control breathing.
- **Complex sleep apnea:** A combination of both obstructive and central sleep apneas.

What are the symptoms of sleep apnea?

People with sleep apnea usually do not remember waking up during the night. Indications of the problem may include:

- Morning headaches
- Excessive daytime sleepiness
- Irritability and impaired mental or emotional functioning
- Pauses in breathing or gasping during sleep
- Insomnia
- Awakening with a dry mouth or sore throat

What’s the difference between snoring and sleep apnea?

Unlike mild snoring, individuals with sleep apnea stop breathing completely for short periods of time, five to 30+ instances in one hour. If your partner hears loud snoring punctuated by silences and then a snort or choking sound as you resume breathing, this pattern could signal sleep apnea.

Why is sleep apnea a concern?

If left untreated, sleep apnea can lead to impaired daytime functioning, high blood pressure, heart attack or stroke. People with this potentially life-threatening disorder can be so fatigued during the day that, when driving, their performance becomes similar to that of a drunken driver.

How can my dentist help?

If your dentist suspects you suffer from sleep apnea, he or she will refer you to a physician, often a sleep medicine specialist. Diagnosis and treatment is based on your medical history, physical examination and the results of a polysomnography – an overnight sleep study, which measures heart rate and how many times breathing is interrupted during sleep.

What are the treatment options?

If you have mild OSA, your physician may recommend regular physical activity, weight loss, or limiting tobacco or alcohol intake. Dental appliances that reposition the jaw or tongue have been helpful to some with mild sleep apnea.

If you have severe sleep apnea, continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) systems are a commonly prescribed therapy. CPAP systems deliver air through a small mask that covers the nose, and the constant pressure keeps the airway open, which prevents both snoring and episodes of apnea. For patients who have trouble tolerating CPAP systems, other treatments, including surgery, can eliminate sleep apnea symptoms.