

Care Gram

Sleep Apnea

What Is Sleep Apnea?

Sleep apnea is a common disorder in which a person has many pauses in breathing or shallow breaths while sleeping. Breathing pauses can last from 10 seconds to over one minute. These often occur 5 to 60 times or more an hour. Typically, normal breathing then starts again, sometimes with a loud snort or choking sound.

Sleep apnea usually is a chronic (ongoing) condition that disrupts sleep on a nightly basis. A person often moves out of deep sleep and into light sleep when breathing pauses or becomes shallow. This results in poor sleep quality that makes a person tired during the day. Sleep apnea is one of the leading causes of excessive daytime sleepiness.

An Overview of Sleep Apnea

Sleep apnea often goes undiagnosed. Doctors usually cannot detect the condition during routine office visits. Also, there are no blood tests for the condition.

Most people who have sleep apnea do not know they have it because it only occurs during sleep. A family member and/or bed partner may first notice the signs of sleep apnea.

Risk factors include being male, overweight, especially heaviness around the neck and face, and over age 40, but can occur in anyone at any age, even in children.

The most common type of sleep apnea is obstructive sleep apnea. This most often means that the airway has collapsed or blocked during sleep. The blockage may cause shallow breathing or breathing pauses.

When you try to breathe, any air that squeezes past the blockage can cause loud snoring. Obstructive sleep apnea happens more often in people who are overweight, but it can affect anyone.

Central sleep apnea is a less common type of sleep apnea. It happens when the area of your brain that controls your breathing does not send the correct signals to your breathing muscles. You make no effort to breathe for brief periods. Central sleep apnea often occurs with obstructive sleep apnea, but it can occur alone. Snoring does not typically happen with central sleep apnea.



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1616-0832
3/10/2025
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What Are the Symptoms of Sleep Apnea?

Some signs and symptoms of sleep apnea might include:

- Excessive daytime sleepiness
- Morning headaches
- Falling asleep while doing sedentary activities such as watching TV
- Frequent waking up and changing positions
- Difficulty concentrating
- Dry mouth upon waking
- Weight gain
- Irritability
- Depression
- Snoring
- Heartburn
- Hypertension

What Will Happen If I Am Not Treated for Sleep Apnea?

Untreated, sleep apnea can:

- Increase the risk for high blood pressure, heart attack, stroke, obesity, diabetes, memory problems, headaches, and erectile dysfunction
- Increase the risk for or worsen heart failure
- Make irregular heartbeats more likely
- Increase the chance of having work-related or driving accidents

What Are Some Guidelines and Treatment Options for Sleep Apnea?

Below are some general guidelines to follow for individuals with sleep apnea:

- Practice good sleep hygiene habits
- Diet and exercise – overweight people can benefit from the effects of weight loss and exercise
 - Weight loss may lessen the severity of sleep apnea
- Avoid alcohol and smoking
- Avoid sedatives – seek your doctor's advice
- Sleep on your side or attempt to elevate the head of your bed

Treatment options include:

- Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) – positive pressure is produced by a small quiet machine and sent to your airways by a small mask that fits over your nose. This positive pressure acts as a splint to keep your airway from collapsing and prevents obstructions. This device is usually small enough to fit on a nightstand and as quiet as a fan on low. The mask is specially fit to your face for optimal comfort.
- Oral devices – these devices help prevent obstruction in the mouth and upper airway. However, oral devices tend to be uncomfortable and ineffective in some patients.
- Surgery – tonsillectomy may benefit children with sleep apnea. For adults, there are few options and surgery is usually not beneficial except in select cases.

What Is Your Snore Score?

Your answers to this quiz will help you decide whether you may suffer from sleep apnea:

- Are you a loud and/or regular snorer? [] Yes [] No
- Have you ever been observed to gasp or stop breathing during sleep? [] Yes [] No
- Do you feel tired or groggy upon awakening? [] Yes [] No
- Do you awaken with a headache? [] Yes [] No
- Are you often tired or fatigued during the wake-time hours? [] Yes [] No
- Do you fall asleep sitting, reading, watching TV, or driving? [] Yes [] No
- Do you often have problems with memory or concentration? [] Yes [] No

If you have one or more of these symptoms, you are at higher risk for having obstructive sleep apnea. If you are also overweight, have a large neck, and/or have high blood pressure, the risk increases even further.