

## **What is Sleep Apnea?**

Sleep Apnea is a serious, potentially life-threatening condition that is far more common than generally understood. First described in 1965, sleep apnea is a breathing disorder characterized by brief interruptions of breathing during sleep. It owes its name to a Greek word, apnea, meaning, "want of breath." There are two types of sleep apnea: central and obstructive. Central sleep apnea, which is less common, occurs when the brain fails to send the appropriate signals to the breathing muscles to initiate respirations.

Obstructive sleep apnea is far more common and occurs when air cannot flow into or out of the person's nose or mouth although efforts to breathe continue. In a given night, the number of involuntary breathing pauses or "apneic events" may be as high as 20 to 60 or more per hour. These breathing pauses are almost always accompanied by snoring between apnea episodes, although not everyone who snores has this condition. Sleep apnea can also be characterized by choking sensations. The frequent interruptions of deep, restorative sleep often leads to excessive daytime sleepiness and may be associated with an early morning headache.

Early recognition and treatment of sleep apnea is important because it may be associated with irregular heartbeat, high blood pressure, heart attack, and stroke.

## **Who Gets Sleep Apnea?**

Sleep apnea occurs in all age groups and both sexes but is more common in men (It may be under-diagnosed in women) and possibly young African Americans. It has been estimated that as many as 18 million Americans have sleep apnea. Four Percent of middle-age men and 2 percent of middle-aged women have sleep apnea along with excessive daytime sleepiness. People most likely to have or develop sleep apnea include those who snore loudly and also are overweight, or have high blood pressure, or have some physical abnormality in the nose, throat, or other parts of the upper airway. Sleep apnea seems to run in some families, suggesting a possible genetic basis...

## **What Causes Sleep Apnea?**

Certain mechanical and structural problems in the airway cause the interruptions in breathing during sleep. In some people, apnea occurs when the throat muscles of the soft palate at the base of the tongue and the uvula (the small fleshy tissue hanging from the center of the back of the throat) relax and sag, the airway becomes blocked, making breathing labored and noisy and even stopping it altogether. Sleep apnea also can occur in obese people when an excess amount of tissue in the airway causes it to be narrowed. With a narrowed airway, the person continues his or her efforts to breathe, but air cannot easily flow into or out of the nose or mouth. Unknown to the person this results in heavy snoring, periods of breathing, and frequent arousals (causing abrupt changes from deep

sleep to light sleep). Ingestion of alcohol and sleeping pills increase the frequency and duration of breathing pauses in people with sleep apnea.