

Sleep Apnea

*“In peace I will both lie down and sleep;
for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.” Psalm 4:8*

A condition known as sleep apnea (pronounced ap-nee-uh) has been receiving a great deal of attention in the last several years. Statistics cite that about 12 million Americans actually have sleep apnea. A person who suffers from this condition stops breathing while he is sleeping. This happens when all or part of the throat becomes blocked. Blockage may be due to extra soft tissue in the throat area, or simply from having a very small throat opening. While it is normal for breathing to pause several times an hour for a few seconds each, those with sleep apnea stop breathing for anywhere from 10 seconds to a minute or more. These pauses cause the brain to rouse that person into partial wakefulness so they begin to breathe again. This prevents REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, which is absolutely essential for a good nights sleep. People with sleep apnea are not aware that this is happening. Actually, roommates or spouses are usually the first to notice that sleep apnea is occurring.

The most common symptoms of sleep apnea are loud snoring, excessive daytime sleepiness, irritability, dry throat upon waking, and morning headaches. If sleep apnea remains untreated, it can cause high blood pressure, memory problems, impotence, stroke, and depression. Because these people are sleepy during the day, they are more likely to have problems at work and more frequent auto accidents.

While sleep apnea can affect anyone, the average patient is male, overweight, and more than forty years of age. Smoking and drinking alcohol also increase the risk of sleep apnea. Luckily, sleep apnea can be diagnosed and treated.

If you suspect you may suffer from this condition, the first step is to speak with your physician. He will take a full history and do a physical exam, and then set up an evaluation. This involves spending the night in a sleep clinic. In the sleep clinic, electrodes are attached to the body for monitoring, and sessions are often videotaped. Breathing, brain activity, oxygen levels, and eye movement are all monitored and measured.

There are a variety of treatments, ranging from behavior changes all the way to surgery. For overweight individuals, losing weight alone can reduce the number of times a person stops breathing. Also, all patients with sleep apnea should avoid sleeping pills and alcohol. In mild cases, apnea may only occur while that person sleeps on his back, in which case there are devices to keep him out of that position. Surgery which removes tissue from the back of the throat is quite painful, and effective less than 50% of the time.

The most common treatment is CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) therapy. A CPAP machine consists of a mask which is attached to a small machine. It is worn at bedtime, and pressure from an air blower forces air through the nasal passages, which prevents the airway from closing. It is important that patients receive proper training, so they can make adjustments

that help them adapt to this lifesaving device. One out of four patients at the UCLA clinic quit using their device out of frustration, so it is important to have access to a professional who can help a patient become comfortable with his CPAP machine.

If you suspect that someone you love suffers from sleep apnea, encourage them to get help **now!**

For more information:

www.sleepapnea.org

www.mayoclinic.com (search sleep apnea)