

SNORING AND SLEEP APNEA

What causes snoring?

When we sleep the muscles in our throats relax which leads to a narrowing of the throat and airway. Snoring itself indicates that the airway is not open enough or is blocked. The sound of snoring is made when the body is trying to force air through that blocked air passage. Approximately 10-30% of adults snore. In most cases snoring causes no serious health risks.

So why is snoring a problem?

For most of us it is not a problem. But for about 20% of those who snore, very loud nightly snoring can be a sign of a possibly life-threatening condition known as **obstructive sleep apnea syndrome or sleep apnea**. In people with sleep apnea, the narrowing of the throat is so great that it becomes hard to breathe. So the brain signals the body to increase its efforts to breathe which in turn briefly awakens the brain so that the airway can stiffen and open the throat. Effort to breathe then decreases again and the brain goes back to sleep. These interruptions in sleep can happen hundreds of times per night. If you have sleep apnea you may not get enough oxygen during sleep and probably don't sleep soundly. You are probably sleepy during the day and that can affect your work, social activities and even car accidents.

Who is at greatest risk for sleep apnea?

- People who are overweight
- Men and women with large neck sizes: 17 or more inches for men, 16 or more inches for women
- Middle-aged and older men and post-menopausal women
- Ethnic minorities
- People with small throats, smaller than normal jaws, or a large tongue
- Adults and children with Down Syndrome
- Children with large tonsils and adenoids
- Anyone who has a family member with sleep apnea

Are there treatments for sleep apnea?

There are several treatment options for sleep apnea. Some are as simple as losing weight or changing sleeping positions. For more serious cases there are machines called Continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) that provides a steady stream of pressurized air to a person by using a mask. This pressure helps keep the airway open when sleeping. There are also oral devices that look like a sports mouth guard that help maintain an open airway by stabilizing the lower jaw, tongue or soft palate and uvula.

What are the signs of sleep apnea?

- Unrefreshing sleep/ frequent wakening
- Daytime sleepiness
- Morning headaches
- Poor concentration and forgetfulness
- Mood changes: anxious, irritable, depressed

What are the health risks associated with sleep apnea?

- Increased heart rate
- High blood pressure
- Increased risk of stroke
- Heart attack
- Impaired glucose tolerance and insulin resistance
- Frequent nighttime urination
- Depression
- Menstrual irregularities
- Increased risk for automobile accidents while driving

What should I do if I suspect I have sleep apnea?

Talk to your doctor. They can have you evaluated for sleep apnea and prescribe the appropriate treatment for you.