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Sleep apnea is a serious condition

BY EBONI ELLIS, M.D., ON CALL

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Q: What is sleep apnea?

Do you snore or have you been told that you snore? Not all snoring is innocent; in fact it could be hazardous to your health.

Sleep apnea is a condition when breathing is diminished or stopped during sleep. There are two types of sleep apnea: Obstructive sleep apnea and central sleep apnea. Obstructive sleep apnea is the more common of the two. It is caused by narrowing or closure of the throat due to anatomical abnormalities. These abnormalities may include a large tongue, enlarged tonsils, enlarged uvula, narrow palate or nasal abnormalities. Central sleep apnea is caused by a change in breathing control and rhythm that is controlled by the brain.

Many people with sleep apnea complain of snoring and ineffective sleep; they may also complain of daytime sleepiness, which can be so severe that it interferes with work or driving. One's bed partner may report snoring or gasping that arouses the patient from sleep, or they may actually report periods of sleep when their bed partner stops breathing. Morning headaches, poor concentration or memory problems, depression, decreased sex drive, and dry throat are other common complaints in patients with sleep apnea.

Who is at risk for developing sleep apnea? Most people with sleep apnea are overweight men. Other risks include obesity, age (40 or older), tobacco use, hypothyroidism and alcohol or sedative use before bedtime. Physical features such as nasal obstruction and craniofacial abnormalities are other risk factors.

Sleep apnea is a serious condition because if left untreated it leads to poor oxygenation of various organs leading to a decline in neurocognitive performance and organ dysfunction. In fact, those with untreated obstructive sleep apnea have up to a six fold increase in mortality. In addition, they have an increase risk of cardiovascular problems such as hypertension, myocardial infarction, stroke and cardiac arrhythmias.

It is recommended that any person who snores and experiences daytime sleepiness be evaluated for sleep apnea. The diagnostic test for apnea includes a sleep study test also called a polysomnography. During this test, a medical doctor specialized in sleep medicine, monitors the number of events in which a patient has periods of low oxygen during sleep. Furthermore, they monitor the number of waking events due to respiratory distress. The main treatment for



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obstructive sleep apnea is a continuous positive airway pressure device or CPAP. It consists of a mask that fits over the nose and mouth, a tube and blower, which provides continuous pressure that keeps the airway open during sleep. Other treatment options include losing weight, avoiding alcohol and other sedating medications and dental devices that help bring the tongue and soft palate forward, relieving obstruction in some people.

Obstruction sleep apnea is a serious, chronic medical condition that requires lifetime care. If you snore and/or suffer from daytime sleepiness, please bring it to the attention of your primary physician for evaluation. Your snoring could be affecting your health.

Eboni Ellis, M.D., is a family medicine resident at Halifax Health. For more information on this physician or to send topics for future medical columns, email the Volusia County Medical Society at docs420@aol.com.

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