

Focus on Sleep Disorders

Sleep problems have been affecting Americans' health for years, but only recently have they attracted more attention as serious medical problems. Today, millions of people in the U.S. suffer from conditions such as insomnia or an inability to obtain a restful night of sleep, yet the majority of those afflicted are never diagnosed or treated appropriately. The possibility of a sleep disorder isn't often considered by either patients or physicians, compared to more mainstream medical conditions such as heart disease.

Over the past decade, we have "woken up" to the serious consequences caused by sleep disruption and sleep deprivation. We are fast becoming a nation that loses sleep and gains weight, and recent research suggests that the two are, in fact, closely related.

The sleeping disorder known as sleep apnea, which causes a person's nighttime breathing to become interrupted and/or irregular, is a potentially serious medical condition that affects the majority of heavy snorers. Initially, the typical patient profile for the disease was a heavyset male over the age of 40 with severe sleepiness during the day and loud snoring at night. We now know that sleep apnea is far more prevalent, with as many as one in five people suffering from at least some degree of sleep-related breathing disorder – making it one of society's most common medical conditions.

Moreover, sleep apnea is now linked to a host of other medical conditions, including hypertension, heart disease, diabetes mellitus, strokes, weight gain and obesity, lipid disorders, erectile dysfunction, female infertility, depression and senility. It is also the second most common cause of deaths from motor vehicle accidents, after drunk driving. In short, it is the dark side of the night.

The good news is sleep apnea is easily treatable. Better yet, treatment of the disorder has a beneficial effect on most of the medical conditions associated with it. A common treatment for sleep apnea is continuous positive airway pressure, or CPAP. In this treatment, the patient wears a device at night, typically a face mask or nasal prongs, that keeps the airways open by providing slightly pressurized air.

CPAP therapy for sleep apnea results in reduced blood pressure similar to what most drugs achieve. Diabetics with sleep apnea achieve better glucose control once the sleep apnea is treated. Over 90 percent of men with sleep apnea find their erectile dysfunction also improves after treating the sleep disorder. And most patients with "unexplained" weight gain find that they start losing weight more effectively once they start CPAP therapy.

Sleep apnea is not just an unrecognized disease in adults. The disorder also affects children of all ages, starting as early as the first year of life, with potentially devastating results including developmental delays, poor school performance and low grades. Sleep apnea can also profoundly affect children's personalities, causing many of these kids to be misdiagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD. Unlike adults, kids don't complain about being sleepy. As every parent knows, a sleepy child is usually irritable, easily distracted and sometimes disruptive, fitting the profile of ADHD.

Children typically develop sleep apnea because of enlarged tonsils and adenoids. Loud snoring in children or persistent mouth-breathing can be a strong indicator that the child is at risk for the disease and should be evaluated.

Before receiving stimulant medications, such as Ritalin® for treatment of ADHD, a thorough sleep evaluation should be conducted.

Sleep apnea and other sleep conditions are typically diagnosed by performing a sleep study. This involves spending one night in a sleep lab, which is essentially a hotel suite where all the patient is required to do is sleep in a comfortable bed. Electrodes taped to the head, nose, chin, chest and legs monitor multiple body functions throughout the night and are then carefully reviewed by sleep experts the next day. The procedure is completely painless.

The therapy of choice for adults with sleep apnea is the use of CPAP. For children, treatment for sleep apnea is usually a surgical procedure to remove their tonsils and adenoids. However, recent research shows that only a third of these children are cured by these procedures and many may still need CPAP therapy just like adults.

The impact of sleep disturbances on the health and welfare of our society is enormous. However, with proper diagnosis most sleep disorders can be effectively treated. The BCM Sleep Center, part of the section of Pulmonary, Critical Care and Sleep Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine, offers comprehensive evaluations for the entire range of sleep disorders.

For more information or to schedule an appointment, call 713.798.3300.

Our Team

Shyamsunder Subramanian, MD
Director, BCM Sleep Center
Assistant Professor of Medicine
Pulmonary, Critical Care, and Sleep Medicine

Behavioral Therapy

Nilgun Giray, MD
Clinical Assistant Professor of Medicine

Mary Rose, PsyD, CBSM
Assistant Professor of Medicine

Dental Sleep Medicine

Stephen Buehler, DDS, DABDSM
Clinical Assistant Professor of Medicine

Make an appointment with a Baylor Clinic expert physician today.

Baylor Clinic
6620 Main Street
Houston, TX 77030
www.bcm.edu/baylorclinic
713.798.1000
1-800-Baylor1

Sources: Shyamsunder Subramanian, MD
Director, BCM Sleep Center
Assistant Professor of Medicine
Pulmonary, Critical Care, and Sleep Medicine
The Margaret M. and Albert B. Alkek
Department of Medicine
Baylor College of Medicine
713.798.3300

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