

Wake-Up Call

Sleep apnea robs you of rest, raises blood sugar, and is life-threatening if not treated

Do you sleep soundly yet feel sleepy during the day? Then you might have sleep apnea. This is a serious problem. It stops your breathing many times during a night's sleep. (Apnea means "without breath" in Greek.) Naresh M. Punjabi, M.D., Ph.D., tells how to recognize and treat it. He is a sleep disorders expert at The Johns Hopkins School of Medicine.

The Effects of Lost Sleep

Feeling drowsy in the daytime is just one effect of sleep apnea. Pauses in breathing reduce oxygen levels in the blood. This makes the heart work harder and may cause high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke. And if you don't sleep well, you're more apt to feel fatigued and depressed. Fatigue also leads to more accidents at work and on roads.

“Obstructive” sleep apnea occurs when soft tissues in the back of your throat collapse. This closes the airway. Breathing may stop for 10 seconds or more. Apnea can happen hundreds of times per night. “Central” sleep apnea is less common. It occurs when your brain sends the wrong signals to the muscles that control breathing.

Know Your Risk

One in three adults with type 2 diabetes has sleep apnea. The link may be a chicken-and-egg issue. “People with diabetes have a higher risk for sleep apnea,” says Punjabi. And those with sleep apnea are at risk for metabolic problems that lead to diabetes.

Sleep apnea is more common among:

- Men
- People over age 40
- Women after menopause
- People with narrow nasal passages. These can cut the flow of oxygen to the lungs.

Both sleep apnea and type 2 diabetes share one strong risk factor: obesity. Excess weight can lead to type 2 diabetes. It can also narrow the airway in the throat. That triggers sleep apnea. Other factors linked with sleep apnea include:

- Smoking
- Alcohol use
- Nasal congestion
- Hormonal changes during menopause

Know the Signs

Many people with sleep apnea don't know they have it. It's hard to notice symptoms when you're asleep! That's why "most of the time, it's the bed partner or spouse who notices the symptoms," says Punjabi. Here are common signs of sleep apnea:

- Loud snoring
- Gaps in breathing during sleep
- Choking and gasping
- Falling asleep during the day

Treating Symptoms Also Helps Control Blood Sugar Levels

There are no medicines for sleep apnea. Milder cases may be helped by weight loss or sleeping on your side. If you have mild to severe sleep apnea, you can wear a special device to bed. The device is called a continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) mask. It applies pressure to the back of the throat to keep the airway open during sleep. Some patients don't like using the mask. They may choose surgery for the upper airway.

Treating your sleep apnea can also help control your blood sugar levels. In one study, 25 people with type 2 diabetes used CPAP for their sleep apnea. They had

reduced sugar levels and improved control. Researchers don't yet know how CPAP caused these changes. Sleep apnea is stressful on the body. Higher levels of stress hormones could make it harder to maintain blood sugar control. So once sleep apnea is treated, it's easier to keep sugar levels in check. That's good news.

Top Tips for Coping with Sleep Apnea

1. **Tell your doctor if you are sleepy during the day.** You can also go to a sleep clinic and be tested.
2. **Watch your weight.** Stick to a low-fat diet and exercise regularly. If you are overweight, even a 5-10 percent weight loss can make a big difference.
3. **Try sleeping on your side.** Sleeping on your back can make sleep apnea worse. .
4. **Avoid alcohol or sedatives before going to bed.** They can relax the throat muscles and constrict your breathing.

*****Authored by Johns Hopkins University and Johns Hopkins Health System*****