

## What is sleep apnea?

Sleep apnea is more common than you may think. The National Sleep Foundation reports that more than 18 million Americans struggle with this nocturnal disorder <sup>(1)</sup>. Despite this statistic, sleep apnea often goes unrecognized by its sufferers and their loved ones. This can be a dangerous, even deadly oversight.

“Apnea” is the Greek word meaning “without breath”. Sleep apnea is therefore aptly named as it occurs when a person ceases to breathe during sleep. These pauses in breathing can last from ten seconds to over a minute in length. This happens repeatedly throughout the night, forcing the brain to trigger a wake-up response to restore air flow to the lungs and brain. These interruptions do not allow the sufferer to enter deep sleep, causing the disorder’s effects to cross over into waking hours.

The most common form of sleep apnea is called obstructive sleep apnea (or OSA). It occurs when the airway closes, or partially closes, due to a collapse or looseness of the soft tissues in the back of the throat. This is a dangerous disorder that can manifest in a host of serious side effects including, but not limited to; disruptive snoring, nighttime choking or gasping, irritability, memory loss, high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease, diabetes, depression, headaches, and excessive daytime sleepiness.

What is the treatment for sleep apnea?

The most common course of treatment for OSA is the use of continuous positive airway pressure, or CPAP. This machine supplies air with a predetermined level of pressure to keep airways open. The pressured air is delivered through a breathing mask, available in different forms according to comfort and breathing style. This regulates the patient’s breathing and even keeps snoring at bay. This is the most consistently successful method of treatment. Less common options include surgery, medication, oral appliances, and implants.

While sleep apnea is not considered curable, there are steps patients can take to improve their overall condition. Some of these include: losing weight, exercising, drinking alcohol in moderation (and not for several hours before bed), quitting smoking and avoiding sleeping on their backs.

What should sleep apnea patients know?

Veteran patients should remember to change their CPAP supplies regularly in order to keep their therapy consistent. CPAPs should be checked annually, and patients should contact their doctor if they have any concerns about their symptoms or their machine’s performance. Patients should not cease therapy without the approval of their doctor.

New sleep apnea patients should know to enter this therapy with a positive attitude, understanding that there will be a transitional period. It will take time for the CPAP to feel entirely comfortable. Patients should keep in mind the importance of this therapy and the danger of the disorder it treats, and let that be motivation to work through the transition. Most importantly, new patients should be certain they have the correct type of mask, to match their breathing style and ensure a proper seal.

Look at the positive use of CPAP; better control of other associated health issues, waking up ore refreshed, enjoyment in daily activities if they are more rested. Be patient! Don’t give up!

Perhaps most importantly, do not be afraid to ask questions. If you notice symptoms in yourself or a loved one, speak up. Ask your doctor.

#### Citations

- 1- <http://sleepdisorders.sleepfoundation.org/sleep-related-breathing-disorders/obstructive-sleep-apnea-syndrome/prevalence/>