

Is It Severe Snoring or Deadly Sleep Apnea?

Is your severe snoring only causing your spouse to be sleep deprived or are you literally risking your life by having untreated Obstructive Sleep Apnea (OSA)? How can you determine if you have sleep apnea? It is estimated that 20 million people in the U.S. have OSA. That's more than have either asthma or diabetes.

What is Obstructive Sleep Apnea? It is the blocking of the upper airway by the relaxed tissues of the throat, tongue and palate while sleeping. It greatly raises blood pressure and heart rate and reduces the quality of sleep throughout the night. While overweight people are likelier to have OSA, there are plenty of thin people who do also.

See if any of these apply to you....severe snoring, gasping, snorting, inability to stay asleep, daytime sleepiness, poor concentration, high blood pressure, morning headache, gastric reflux, irritability, depression, decreased sex drive, male impotence, thrashing around in bed, waking up sweaty, frequent bathroom visits during the night.

Please notice that these are adult symptoms. Any one to these does not mean that you have OSA, but if you have several you may. There are also lots of children with Obstructive Sleep Apnea who have some different symptoms and who require different therapy. My next column will be about pediatric OSA.

So is OSA actually deadly for adults or does it just wreck the quality of life? Well over the long term, OSA's effect will definitely shorten one's life due to the havoc it wreaks on the body. In fact, the younger the adult that has OSA, the greater the chance of early death. Another death issue of OSA is the number of highway deaths due to sleepy driving. There are far more sleepy drivers than drunk drivers on the road, with similar results.

How do I find out for sure if I have OSA? If several of the symptoms applied to you, please discuss it with your physician. If he or she suspects OSA, they will refer you to either a sleep lab or a sleep medicine specialist. At a Sleep Lab you will be monitored closely electronically while you sleep. Scenic Mountain Medical Center now has a Sleep Lab which looks like a nice hotel room. Medical Insurance will normally help with the cost of your Sleep Study (usually a polysomnogram).

What is the treatment for OSA? The recommended treatment for moderate or severe OSA is normally Continuous Positive Air Pressure (CPAP). CPAP works for the majority of these patients beautifully if they can tolerate it. Most, but not all can. I've had two severe OSA sufferers in the last month volunteer how CPAP has greatly improved their quality of life.

So why am I, a dentist, writing this article? I care about my patients' overall health and this is a huge problem for some. When I look at a patient's pharyngeal area I can tell with great accuracy who has problems with either snoring or OSA, by how much airway space I can see. I can't tell however who is just a snorer. OSA symptoms and a Sleep Study do.

Also, trained dentists can make oral appliances that gently pull the jaw forward to help open the airway. The devices are recognized as being very effective for reducing snoring or mild OSA. They are not the “gold standard” for moderate or severe OSA management as CPAP is. The oral appliances can greatly help moderate or severe patients who either cannot or will not use a CPAP machine or who want to use lower air pressures on it. Also, many CPAP users like to have an oral appliance to take on the airplane, out of town trip, or hunting expedition instead of their CPAP.

There are several oral appliances and the specific circumstances of the patient determine the best. Remember, you owe to your family, and yourself to manage your OSA appropriately!

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