

OBSTRUCTIVE SLEEP APNEA IN ADULTS

Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) is a condition in which there are short pauses in breathing while you sleep because your airway is narrowed, blocked or floppy. These pauses can last for 10 to 30 seconds, or even longer. After this pause, your brain realizes you haven't been breathing. It wakens you so that you will take a breath. People with OSA can stop breathing hundreds of times each night but many are completely unaware of those awakenings. Enough of these interruptions in your normal sleep can cause fatigue and sleepiness during the day.

OSA prevents you from having the sleep you need to stay healthy. If it's not treated, OSA can cause major health problems like heart attacks, strokes and depression. It can also result in motor vehicle accidents.

What factors increase your chances of having OSA?

Obesity; a large, thick neck; family members with OSA; male sex; age over 40; large tonsils or a recessed chin (chin that tucks in).

What are the signs and symptoms of OSA?

Feeling extremely sleepy during the day; loud snoring; unrefreshing sleep; feeling moody, less interest in sex. As stated above, many people are unaware of the nighttime awakenings.

How is it diagnosed?

Your medical history, physical exam, and a sleep questionnaire might suggest you have OSA. It is then diagnosed with a sleep study (called polysomnography) done in a laboratory. When that's not available, a home device can be used if your doctor suspects you have moderate or severe OSA and don't have other conditions that interfere with the results.

How is it treated?

Continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) is the best treatment. You wear a special mask attached to a machine that blows a steady stream of air through the mask, into your nose and down your throat. The pressure holds your airway open, so you can breathe properly all night. If you have trouble using this machine, talk to your doctor or respiratory care company as there are ways to make CPAP more comfortable. If that doesn't work, your doctor may advise that you try another type of positive airway pressure machine.

Other treatments include:

- Losing weight if you're overweight
- Avoiding alcohol and sedatives
- Sleeping on your side and not your back
- Wearing a dental (oral) appliance at night. It holds your tongue and jaw towards the front of your mouth, so they don't slip back and block your airway.
- For a small group of patients, surgery may be an option – e.g., removing the uvula (the tissue that hangs in the back of your mouth) and other throat tissue including the tonsils.

To view an animation of OSA and how CPAP works to treat it, go to: <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/cpap/> Click the "start" button to play it.

Sources:

- 1)** Patient information: Sleep apnea in adults (Beyond the Basics). UpToDate. 2013 <http://www.uptodate.com/contents/sleep-apnea-in-adults-beyond-the-basics>
- 2)** The Lung Association. Sleep Apnea. 2012 http://www.lung.ca/diseases-maladies/apnea-apnee_e.php