

The Cardiovascular Center at Holy Redeemer

You Don't Snooze... You Lose: Sleep Apnea and Heart Disease

As many as 20 million people suffer from sleep apnea, but not all realize the connection between sleep apnea and heart disease.

Sleep apnea is a common medical condition in which your breathing temporarily stops or becomes shallow during sleep. In sleep apnea, breathing typically pauses for more than 10 seconds at a time – more than 20 times an hour – while you sleep. Then, each time you return to normal breathing, you may make a loud snoring sound. This is often recognized by a partner who is awakened by these irregular snoring patterns.

“The older you are, the more likely you are to snore. Snoring that is regular with each breath is common,” says Dr. Schuman. “However, snoring interrupted by gasps and deep breaths is problematic. Partners should listen for and be aware of these abnormal snoring patterns because if sleep apnea is left untreated, the condition can cause serious health problems.”

Understanding sleep apnea

Sleep apnea increases your risk of heart disease due to a variety of factors. One of which is lack of oxygen. The struggle to breathe causes your body to release adrenaline-like substances into the bloodstream – the so-called fight-or-flight reflex. These substances, as well as the release of others that can eventually damage the lining of your body's blood vessels, might eventually cause or worsen heart problems and other forms of cardiovascular disease that include:

- High blood pressure
- Heart failure
- Heart rhythm problems
- Coronary artery disease
- Hypertension
- Stroke

Risk factors for sleep apnea include excess body weight, especially in the shoulder and neck; a collar size of greater than 17; large tonsils; or a family history of the condition.

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Diagnosis and Treatment

To accurately diagnosis sleep apnea, a patient's sleep patterns are recorded in overnight or daytime studies and analyzed using sophisticated technology. Treatments include continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP), which involves wearing a mask at night that blows air into the nose to keep the airway open; a custom-fit mouthpiece to advance the jaw and tongue and keep the airway open; or, surgical intervention.

If you have very mild sleep apnea, try avoiding alcoholic drinks at bedtime, losing weight, and sleeping on your side instead of your back.

A new lease on life

"Patients have said, 'You gave me my life back' after they are able to sleep normally," says Dr. Schuman. "Sleep apnea is definitely a treatable condition, and treatment can help you and your heart stay healthy, but the biggest step is to first seek appropriate medical attention."