WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT OBSTRUCTIVE SLEEP APNEA

In the Clinic
Annals of Internal Medicine

What is obstructive sleep apnea?

Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) is a common problem that disrupts breathing during sleep. People with OSA temporarily stop or decrease their breathing while sleeping, causing decreases in oxygen levels. These pauses can awaken a person or prevent the deepest and most restful sleep, causing daytime sleepiness. OSA is also associated with serious health effects. Poor sleep can lead to an increase in accidents and a reduced quality of life and is also associated with high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke.

What are the warning signs?

- Loud snoring (although everyone who snores does not have OSA and some people with OSA do not snore)
- Daytime sleepiness
- Choking or gasping during sleep (usually observed by a sleep partner)
- Awakening with shortness of breath
- Frequent awakening
- Morning headaches
- High blood pressure
- Poor memory, trouble with concentration, or mood swings due to sleepiness and fatigue

How is it diagnosed?

In addition to discussing your symptoms, your doctor will ask about your medical history and any medicines you are taking. Reports from others that you snore loudly or gasp during sleep are also important. Your doctor may order a sleep study (called a polysomnogram), which involves sleeping at a special lab that measures your breathing, heart rate, and oxygen levels during sleep. If polysomnography is not available, a study performed at home may be an option.

How is it treated?

Treatments vary according to the severity of OSA. Your doctor may recommend lifestyle changes, such as losing weight or quitting smoking. He may suggest changing the position of sleep, avoiding sleeping on your back, and forcing yourself to sleep on your side. Alcohol should be avoided before sleep. Many patients are effectively treated and feel better with continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) treatment. CPAP involves wearing a mask connected to a machine that blows air into the airway to prevent the path of air being blocked. Other options for treating OSA may be available, based on your particular situation. Talk with your doctor about the best treatment plan.

For More Information

http://effectivehealthcare.ahrq.gov/ehc/products/117/684/sleep_ap_consumer.pdf
Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality.

www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000811.htm
Medline Plus.

www.sleepapnea.org/learn/sleep-apnea/obstructive-sleep-apnea.html
American Sleep Apnea Association.

http://patients.thoracic.org/information-series/en/resources/obstructive-sleep-apnea.pdf
American Thoracic Society.

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Patient Information