



# TakeCharge

WELCOA'S ONLINE SELF-CARE BULLETIN

## MORE THAN A SNORE

### *A Look at Sleep Apnea*

Sleep apnea (AP-ne-ah) is a common disorder in which you have one or more pauses in breathing or shallow breaths while you sleep.

Breathing pauses can last from a few seconds to minutes. They may occur 30 times or more an hour. Typically, normal breathing then starts again, sometimes with a loud snort or choking sound.

Sleep apnea usually is a chronic (ongoing) condition that disrupts your sleep. When your breathing pauses or becomes shallow, you'll often move out of deep sleep and into light sleep.

As a result, the quality of your sleep is poor, which makes you tired during the day. Sleep apnea is a leading cause of excessive daytime sleepiness.

### **Detecting & Diagnosing Sleep Apnea**

Sleep apnea often goes undiagnosed. Doctors usually can't detect the condition during routine office visits. Also, no blood test can help diagnose the condition.

Most people who have sleep apnea don't know they have it because it only occurs during sleep. A family member or bed partner might be the first to notice signs of sleep apnea.



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The most common type of sleep apnea is obstructive sleep apnea. In this condition, the airway collapses or becomes blocked during sleep. This causes shallow breathing or breathing pauses.

When you try to breathe, any air that squeezes past the blockage can cause loud snoring. Obstructive sleep apnea is more common in people who are overweight, but it can affect anyone. For example, small children who have enlarged tonsil tissues in their throats may have obstructive sleep apnea.

## Major Signs and Symptoms

One of the most common signs of obstructive sleep apnea is loud and chronic (ongoing) snoring. Pauses may occur in the snoring. Choking or gasping may follow the pauses.

The snoring usually is loudest when you sleep on your back; it might be less noisy when you turn on your side. You might not snore every night. Over time, however, the snoring can happen more often and get louder.

You're asleep when the snoring or gasping happens. You likely won't know that you're having problems breathing or be able to judge how severe the problem is. A family member or bed partner often will notice these problems before you do.

Not everyone who snores has sleep apnea.

Another common sign of sleep apnea is fighting sleepiness during the day, at work, or while driving. You may find yourself rapidly falling asleep during the quiet moments of the day when you're not active. Even if you don't have daytime sleepiness, talk with your doctor if you have problems breathing during sleep.

Central sleep apnea is a less common type of sleep apnea. This disorder occurs if the area of your brain that controls your breathing doesn't send the correct signals to your breathing muscles. As a result, you'll make no effort to breathe for brief periods.

Central sleep apnea can affect anyone. However, it's more common in people who have certain medical conditions or use certain medicines.

Central sleep apnea can occur with obstructive sleep apnea or alone. Snoring typically doesn't happen with central sleep apnea.

This article mainly focuses on obstructive sleep apnea.

## Who Is at Risk for Sleep Apnea?

Obstructive sleep apnea is a common condition. About half of the people who have this condition are overweight.

Men are more likely than women to have sleep apnea. Although the condition can occur at any age, the risk increases as you get older. A family history of sleep apnea also increases your risk for the condition.

People who have small airways in their noses, throats, or mouths are more likely to have sleep apnea. Small airways might be due to the shape of these structures or allergies or other conditions that cause congestion.

Small children might have enlarged tonsil tissues in their throats. Enlarged tonsil tissues raise a child's risk for sleep apnea. Overweight children also might be at increased risk for sleep apnea.

Race and ethnicity might play a role in the risk of developing sleep apnea. However, more research is needed.