

Sleep Apnea: When snoring is more than just annoying

by Dr. Delia Chiamonte, [Baltimore Health Examiner](#)



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Does your bedmate snore? Do the windows rattle? This can disrupt your sleep, of course, but snoring can also be a sign of a more serious condition. It can be a sign of sleep apnea, which can have dangerous consequences.

‘Apnea’ means without breath. People with Obstructive Sleep Apnea stop breathing during the night, sometimes up to a hundred times. They will partially wake up every time this occurs because the brain won’t allow them to suffocate. This understandably leaves them tired and unrefreshed the next day.

Usually this breathing problem occurs because the soft tissue in the back of the throat relaxes and collapses during sleep, making it impossible for the air to pass from the nose to the lungs. It can appear after someone has gained weight, but don’t assume that thin people who snore can’t have sleep apnea – they can. Sleep apnea even affects children.

Sleep apnea can be serious. It isn’t just daytime sleepiness (and the resulting risk of car accidents) that you have to worry about. Untreated, sleep apnea can lead to high blood pressure, weight gain, headaches, impotence, and even heart attacks. Basically your body has to deal with the stress of being shaken awake over and over all night long. How relaxed would you be? This repetitive overnight stress, and the resulting release of stress hormones, can have serious and long-lasting health consequences.

So what should you do if you think your loved one may have sleep apnea? Get a sleep study to find out. Sleep studies are funny tests because they require you to spend the night in a sleep lab hooked up to all kinds of wires and sensors. This allows the doctors to assess how many times you stopped breathing and for how long. Many people are shocked to find out how poorly they’ve been sleeping and amazed at how good they feel once they get treated.

What can you do if the test comes back positive?

There are a few things that you can do to improve your sleep apnea, but CPAP is your best bet. CPAP, which stands for continuous positive airway pressure, is basically a

mask that you wear while you sleep that is hooked up to a little machine. The CPAP blows a little bit of air into your airway in order to keep it open while you sleep. This prevents the airway collapse, keeps you breathing all night long and prevents the complications of constant nighttime stress.

Now, I'll be honest. I have never worn a CPAP machine but I do know that some people hate them. Some people just never get used to sleeping with the mask on their face or are bothered by the hum of the machine. Yet I have found most people with sleep apnea to be extremely grateful. Once they discover how good they can feel with a real night's sleep, the annoyance of the mask becomes tolerable.

There are an estimated 12 million Americans with sleep apnea, and most of them are thought to be undiagnosed. If you know someone who has loud snoring, daytime sleepiness, high blood pressure, or morning headaches, encourage him or her to get a sleep study ASAP!

Your loved one will be healthier and, if you share a bed, you'll be much more rested too.

Sweet Dreams,

-Dr. C

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