



Sleep Apnea: Your Dentist May Have Your Cure

By Ana Brightleaf, DMD

Once a little-recognized disease, sleep apnea has become increasingly widespread. Because it involves the palate and throat, it is only logical that dentists have moved to the front lines in its diagnosis, treatment and cure.

What Is Sleep Apnea?

Technically speaking, sleep apnea is a chronic condition that disrupts your sleep 3 or more nights each week. You often move out of deep sleep and into light sleep when your breathing pauses or becomes shallow – which can happen several times an hour. This results in poor sleep quality that, in addition to promoting a variety of health conditions, makes you tired during the day.

Sleep apnea is far more widespread than most people realize. It is about as common as adult diabetes, affecting over 12 million Americans. However, it often goes unrecognized and untreated because of lack of awareness by both health professionals and the public. Doctors usually can't detect sleep apnea during routine office visits and there are no blood tests for the condition. Most people who have sleep apnea don't know they have it because it only occurs during sleep. A family member and/or bed partner may be the first to notice the signs of sleep apnea.

What to Look For

Prevalent signs and symptoms of the most common forms of sleep apnea include:

- Excessive daytime sleepiness (hypersomnia)
- Loud snoring, which is usually more prominent in obstructive sleep apnea
- Observed episodes of breathing cessation during sleep
- Abrupt awakenings accompanied by shortness of breath
- Awakening with a dry mouth or sore throat
- Morning headache

1304 Fifteenth Street, Suite 209
Santa Monica, California
Telephone (310) 395-1810
info@brightleafdental.com
www.brightleafdental.com



- Difficulty staying asleep at night (insomnia)

Obviously, simply having one or more of these symptoms does not mean you have sleep apnea. However, if you are experiencing any of them and they do not resolve in a reasonable amount of time, investigating sleep apnea may be in order. It can account for a number of seemingly unrelated problems.

Effects of Sleep Apnea

Lack of treatment is causing severe distress for its sufferers. Medically, sleep apnea is associated with:

- Hypertension
- Heart Failure
- Coronary occlusion
- High blood pressure
- Heart beat irregularity
- Stroke
- Diabetes
- Erectile dysfunction and impotence
- Mental impairment
- Depression
- Obesity
- Increased risk of sudden cardiac death during sleep hours

Untreated sleep apnea may be responsible for poor performance in everyday activities such as handling tasks at work and school, motor vehicle crashes, and academic underachievement in children and adolescents.

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Some Sleep Apnea Treatments

At one time the treatment options for sleep apnea were few and somewhat extreme. Today, however, there are more choices and new approaches that are less intrusive. Some of the most promising approaches are being managed by dentists trained in recognizing and working with sleep apnea.

Treatments range from conservative measures, such as modifying certain personal habits, to extreme approaches, such as surgery. The good news is that there are also new, effective options that are much closer to the conservative than to the extreme.

The following are some of the most effective and least intrusive of the treatment options.

Behavioral Modifications for Sleep Apnea

In mild cases of sleep apnea, conservative therapy may be all that is needed. These approaches include:

- Losing weight
- Avoiding alcohol and sleeping pills
- Changing sleep positions to promote regular breathing

Stopping smoking. Smoking can increase the swelling in the upper airway which may worsen both snoring and apnea.

Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP)

Continuous positive airway pressure -- also called CPAP -- is a treatment in which a mask is worn over the nose and/or mouth while you sleep. The mask is hooked up to a machine that delivers a continuous flow of air into the nostrils. The positive pressure from air flowing into the nostrils helps keep the airways open so that breathing is not impaired.

Dental Devices

Dental devices can be made that help keep the airway open during sleep. Such devices can be specifically designed by dentists with special expertise in treating sleep apnea.

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Which of the choices is best for you? That can only be determined with the assistance of your medical professional.

When Is It Time to Seek Medical Assistance?

Consult a medical professional if you experience, or if your partner observes, any of the following:

- Snoring loud enough to disturb the sleep of others or yourself
- Shortness of breath that awakens you from sleep
- Intermittent pauses in your breathing during sleep
- Excessive daytime drowsiness, which may cause you to fall asleep while you're working, watching television or even driving

Many people don't think of snoring as a sign of something potentially serious. Certainly not everyone who has sleep apnea snores and not everyone who snores has sleep apnea. But be sure to talk to your doctor or dentist if you experience loud snoring, especially snoring that's punctuated by periods of silence.

Who is at Risk for Sleep Apnea?

Sleep apnea can affect anyone at any age, even children. However, risk factors for sleep apnea include:

- Male gender
- Being overweight
- Being over the age of forty
- Having a large neck size (17 inches or greater in men and 16 inches or greater in women)
- Having larger tonsils
- Having a family history of sleep apnea

These factors are provided to point you in a direction toward possible relief of a condition you may not have known you had.

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Conclusion

Sleep apnea is a widespread disease that affects millions of Americans. There are numerous side effects associated with it and they can become severe. With greater attention being paid to sleep apnea, effective treatment has become more available, less intrusive, and more practical to apply. Dentists trained in recognizing and treating sleep apnea have moved into the forefront of treatment and the cure of sleep-related diseases.

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