

“Sweet dreams and no apneas”

Strange as it may sound but this may be how we may have to wish someone with the disorder- obstructive sleep apnea (OSA). It is a condition affecting millions of people all over the world and yet we seem to lack enough awareness about this problem in our country.

Many of us are familiar with diseases like diabetes, hypertension, heart attack and stroke. However, we certainly need to learn lot more about a condition like OSA which could worsen the above diseases and also increase risk of having heart attack or stroke. OSA can also affect a person's quality of work due to lack of adequate and quality sleep. Sometimes OSA may be the reason for domestic disturbances and psychological problems like excessive anger or depression.

So, what is obstructive sleep apnea? What happens during sleep? Who is at risk? How can we find out? What treatment is available? Can we cure the condition?

I am sure such questions would pop up instantly in our mind.

Apnea simply means-“no breathe”. Sleep apnea could be due to ‘obstruction’ to airflow to the lungs or ‘central’ wherein the brain fails to send signals to breathe (for few seconds). The outcome of such a problem is lack of oxygen which has harmful effects on some vital organs like the heart, brain and lungs.

Obstructive sleep apnea is a more common condition which is seen frequently in individuals who snore when asleep (loud snorers especially). All snorers do not develop OSA but, they are certainly at risk if they are overweight or obese. Snorers tend to have a narrow airway (tube carrying air in and out of lungs) which gets squashed further by the extra pad of fat around the airway in obese or overweight persons. This narrow airway collapses during sleep hampering flow of oxygen.

An affected person with OSA has many episodes of apneas followed by arousal from sleep (sometimes with choking sensation) due to which the quality of sleep is poor leading to sleep deprivation and daytime sleepiness. The whole process repeats again like a cyclical loop when the patient sleeps more during daytime.

Patients with OSA commonly complain of tiredness, lack of concentration, irritability, excessive daytime sleepiness, not feeling refreshed on waking from sleep, morning headaches and depression. OSA is worse in those who use sleeping pills or drink alcohol in the evening.

In extremely obese patients there may be serious problems causing retention of carbon dioxide in blood apart from low oxygen levels. If left uncorrected this would subsequently lead to increase in pressure in blood vessels of the lungs (pulmonary hypertension) and heart failure. This complication due to OSA can shorten the life expectancy of an individual considerably.

What should one do? Knowing about the condition is the first step towards tackling the problem. If you are a snorer, overweight/ obese and or have diabetes, hypertension or heart trouble or suffer from any of the above mentioned symptoms, then, do not hesitate to consult your doctor for a sleep study.

Sleep study is a simple and painless test performed during sleep to confirm OSA. It can be done in your own house or in a sleep lab in a hospital.

Once confirmed there are many ways of treating this condition. Most popular and effective way is by using a face or nose mask attached to a machine blowing air called a CPAP or Bi-PAP machine. Sometimes, surgery or oral devices can be tried as an option. Some patients undergo surgery on their stomach to make it small and reduce food intake in order to lose weight. Efforts to lose weight through exercise and diet changes can also help to a great extent in reversing the obstruction to airflow.

Many patients have experienced significant improvement in their symptoms within few days and some of them have started to enjoy an active and healthy lifestyle which they missed for a long time.

As the epidemic of obesity spreads across the world there is a growing need to recognize and correct problems like OSA before a catastrophic event occurs. With appropriate treatment we can also wish our friends and relatives with OSA- 'sweet dreams and sleep well'.



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