

Recognizing and Treating Sleep Apnea

Obstructive Sleep Apnea Myths and Facts

1. Sleep Apnea Is Just Snoring

Myth. Although snoring can be a sign of sleep apnea, there's a big difference between the two. People with sleep apnea actually stop breathing up to 400 times throughout the night. These interruptions last 10 to 30 seconds and are often followed by a snort when breathing resumes. This breaks your sleep cycle and can leave you tired during the day.

2 Sleep Apnea Is Not Dangerous

Myth. All those interruptions in sleep take a toll on the body and mind. Untreated sleep apnea has been linked to job-related injuries, car accidents, heart attacks, and strokes.

3. Sleep Apnea Blocks Your Breath

Fact. The most common type of sleep apnea is obstructive sleep apnea, or OSA. It happens when the tongue, tonsils, or other tissues in the back of the throat block the airway. When you try to breathe in, the air can't get through. Central sleep apnea is less common than OSA. Central sleep apnea means the brain doesn't always signal the body to breathe when it should.

4. Only the Old Get Sleep Apnea

Myth. Doctors estimate that more than 18 million Americans have sleep apnea. Although it's more common after age 40, the disorder can affect people of all ages. You're more likely to develop OSA if you are overweight, male, African-American, or Latino. The condition also tends to run in families.

5. Alcohol Will Help You Sleep

Myth. A nightcap may make you drowsy, but it does not promote good quality sleep. Alcohol relaxes the muscles in the back of the throat. This makes it easier for the airway to become blocked in people with OSA. Sleeping pills have the same effect.

6. Sleep Apnea Is Rare in Kids

Myth. OSA is actually common in children, affecting as many as one in 10. In most cases, the symptoms are mild, and the child eventually outgrows the condition. But some children may develop behavioral issues or serious medical problems as a result of OSA.

7. Losing Weight Can Help

Fact. You may be able to improve OSA by making some changes in your life. If you're overweight, talk to your doctor about starting a weight loss program. Shedding even a small percentage of body weight can improve symptoms. If you smoke, ask your doctor about products that can help you quit.

8. Lying On Your Side Can Help

Fact. If you sleep on your back, gravity can pull tissues in the throat down, where they're more likely to block the airway. Sleeping on your side instead may help open the throat. There are special pillows to help keep you on your side. Some people even use shirts with tennis balls sewn to the back.

9. A Mouthpiece Works for Some

Fact. A dentist or orthodontist can specially make a mouthpiece or oral appliance to ease mild sleep apnea. The mouthpiece is custom made for the individual and adjusts the position of the lower jaw and tongue. You put it in at bedtime to help keep your airway open while you sleep.

10. CPAP Is Effective Treatment

Fact. CPAP stands for continuous positive airway pressure. A CPAP machine blows a steady stream of air into the airway. The flow of air is adjusted until it's strong enough to keep the airway open while you sleep. CPAP is the most common treatment for adults with moderate to severe OSA.

11. Try Surgery If Nothing Else Works

Myth. In some patients, surgery may be able to cure OSA. A good example is a child with large tonsils that block the airway. Removing tonsils can often provide a solution. In adults, surgery may improve symptoms by shrinking or stiffening floppy tissues. But this is not an option for everyone. Patients should consider the pros and cons and their doctor's opinion before going forward with a surgical procedure.

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