

What you should know about sleep apnea

■ Your doctor has recently told you that you have *sleep apnea*. The information here will give you a better understanding of this disorder. You'll also find advice on what you—working closely with your doctor—can do to manage it.

What is sleep apnea?

If you frequently stop breathing during sleep, you are said to have sleep apnea. These spells of "breath-holding" usually last at least 10 seconds each. They may occur without your even knowing about them.

However, you *will* notice that you tend to sleep poorly and often feel low on energy, even drowsy, during the day. Other problems you may have noticed are morning headaches, poor memory and concentration, irritability, and loss of sex drive. In addition, your spouse may complain that you snore loudly (see "How sleep apnea may affect you," next page).

How does sleep apnea occur?

Ordinarily, the tongue and other muscles in the throat relax a little bit during sleep. Still, the breathing passage remains firm and open, so that air can flow in and out (see "Normal," below).

If you have sleep apnea, your tongue and the other muscles in your throat are "floppy." Instead, of being like a firm straw, your throat is more like a collapsible balloon. When you breathe in during sleep, the balloon deflates rather than inflates: Your air passage narrows shut and, as a result, you have trouble breathing (see "Sleep apnea," below).

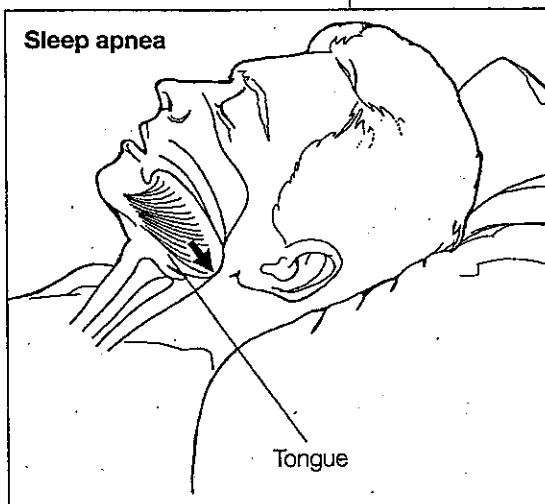
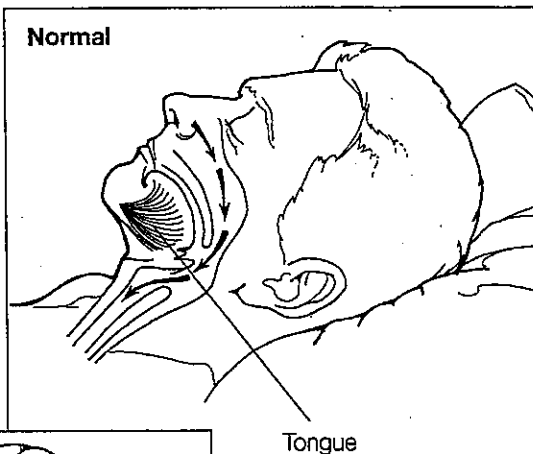


Figure - Normally, the breathing passage is firm and open during sleep. In sleep apnea, however, the tongue and other muscles are "floppy" and tend to block the flow of air.

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What causes sleep apnea?

Certain problems make sleep apnea more likely to occur. Being very overweight tends to narrow the throat and shrink the air passage. In fact, 75% of people with sleep apnea are very overweight.

Any medical disorder that causes narrowing of the throat—enlarged tonsils or thyroid problems, for example—could increase the chances of sleep apnea.

Sedatives given before or after surgery may worsen sleep apnea. So be sure to tell any doctor who will be performing surgery on you that you have sleep apnea.

Sleep apnea occurs mostly in middle-aged men. But it may also occur in women after menopause. Doctors are not sure why men are more likely to get sleep apnea, but they think that hormones and differences in the throat may be involved:

How is sleep apnea treated?

A number of treatments are now available to help people with sleep apnea. They include medicine to fight off sleepiness during the day, devices that can be used at night to prevent the air passage from collapsing during sleep, and surgery.

Your doctor will tailor a treatment program to fit your needs and the specific type of sleep apnea you have. In addition, try to follow the practical tips listed below (and summarized at right). They apply to most people with sleep apnea.

- *Lose weight.* Work with your doctor to develop a balanced diet and exercise program that you can stick with. By itself, losing weight can improve sleep apnea a great deal. You may have tried dieting in the past, but it's very important to try again, to help you get a better night's sleep and be more alert in the daytime.
- *Stay away from alcohol and sleeping pills.* These drugs cause your breathing passage to narrow by making it even more floppy and collapsible. As a result, you have more trouble breathing during sleep.
- *Sleep on your side.* Try not to sleep on your back. This causes your tongue to flop into your throat and tends to make snoring and breathing problems worse.
- *Don't drive when you're sleepy.* If you have daytime sleepiness, it may not be safe to drive, especially if you drive a school bus or truck.
- *Closely follow your doctor's instructions on treatment.* Jot down your treatment program in the space provided below. Don't be afraid to ask questions if you have them. Let your doctor know how treatment is working for you and tell him or her about any problems.

Special instructions for you:

How sleep apnea may affect you

Tendency to sleep poorly
Feeling of being low
on energy or drowsy
during the day
Morning headaches
Poor memory and
concentration
Irritability
Loss of sex drive
Tendency to snore loudly

What you can do about sleep apnea

Lose weight
Avoid alcohol
and sleeping pills
Sleep on your side
Avoid driving when you feel
tired
Closely follow the treatment
program your doctor
recommends

If you have questions, call me: