

OBSTRUCTIVE SLEEP APNEA



You've seen those commercials on TV and the Internet — What is sleep apnea and why are so many losing sleep over it?

Does your bed partner complain about your snoring? Are you unusually sleepy during the day and don't know why? These are two of the most common symptoms of obstructive sleep apnea (OSA), a sleep-related breathing disorder that can cause you to stop breathing dozens or even hundreds of times each night. According to The Canadian Lung Association, these breathing episodes usually last for 10 to 30 seconds —not long enough to fully wake you up but enough to prevent you from enjoying the restful sleep your body needs to recharge its batteries and stay healthy.

A Canadian Community Health Survey conducted in 2009 by the Public Health Agency of Canada found that an estimated 858,900 Canadian adults, 18 years and older, reported being told by a health professional that they have sleep apnea.

“Only a physician can diagnose obstructive sleep apnea,” says Dr. Deborah Saunders, a dentist practising in Sudbury, ON. Dentists do not diagnose OSA. However, a dentist may see patients who they suspect may be at risk and will refer them to their family physicians for further diagnostic followup. As they do with discussing tobacco intervention or oral cancer with patients, dentists have advantages over other health-care professionals in identifying patients at risk of OSA, because dentists generally see their patients on a more frequent and consistent basis. As well, because the jaws and related structures may influence OSA, dentists play an important role in identifying patients who should be assessed [by a physician] and helping to institute treatment in selected cases.

Treatment Options

The most effective treatment for mild or moderate sleep apnea, says The Canadian Lung Association, is continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP). With CPAP you wear a special mask attached to a CPAP machine. A steady stream of air is blown through the mask, into your nose and down your throat. The pressure helps keep your airways open so you can breathe properly all night. Other treatments for mild sleep apnea include lifestyle changes such as losing weight, avoiding alcohol and sedatives and sleeping on your side, not your back. Your doctor may also recommend that you use a dental (or an oral appliance) that fits over your teeth and prevents your tongue and jaw from blocking your airway. In comparison to CPAP devices, these appliances are sometimes regarded as a convenient, silent and more bed partner-friendly choice, says Dr. Alan Lowe, Professor and Chair of the Division of Orthodontics, University of British Columbia's Faculty of Dentistry. There are more than 80 different oral appliances currently available. These should only be prescribed by your family physician, who may refer you directly to your dentist, says Dr. Saunders. A cautionary note from Dr. Saunders: some patients who have been diagnosed with sleep apnea may be curious about ordering prefabricated devices over the Internet. “Think twice,” she says. “You may end up with jaw pain or other problems. That could be significant and serious.”

For more information on sleep apnea— including a quiz to help identify the main symptom of sleep apnea, daytime sleepiness — visit The Canadian Lung Association's website at www.lung.ca.

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