

Sleep Apnea

Hi. Hello. It's me. The author of this tip sheet. Feel free to generalize about what kind of person you think would have this job and consider where I might fall among your audience.

Before working on this tip sheet, if someone asked me to tell them all I knew about sleep apnea, I would have said, "Oh yeah. The thing with the snoring? The loud mask? CPAP machine, I think?"

That's it. Literally 100% of my knowledge of a disorder that affects up to 21% of adults in the U.S.!

But as you may have noticed in our Sleep Disorder Overview ([LINK](#)) tip sheet, a lack of sleep can lead to a host of other comorbidities, and a sleep disorder that affects over 54 million adults in the US is one we should probably know more about.

So What Is Sleep Apnea?

People with sleep apnea have repeated issues with their breathing during sleep.

It could be caused by the airway falling closed and blocking air from flowing (obstructive sleep apnea) or, less commonly, by the brain not sending the signal to breathe (central sleep apnea).

The breathing interruptions could occur as little as five times an hour in mild cases, or hundreds of times throughout the night in severe cases.

21%

of adults in the U.S. are affected by sleep apnea.



Often the symptoms may seem like they're just part of being an adult, and if the snoring isn't keeping someone up all night it's no surprise that so many people with sleep apnea aren't aware that their health could be improved with treatment.

Sleep Apnea Can Present a Range of Symptoms

Many people have no idea they are living with sleep apnea. Symptoms vary from person to person but may include:

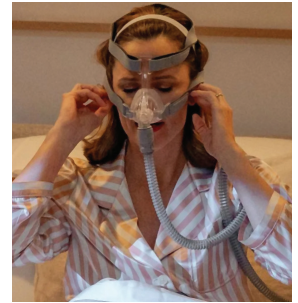
- Loud snoring, gasping sounds or silent pauses in breathing while sleeping, maybe noticed by a roommate
- Waking up with a dry mouth or headache
- Waking frequently during the night to go to the bathroom
- Insomnia or waking often during the night
- Difficulty staying awake during the day
- Feeling tired or unrefreshed, even after sleeping.
- Grumpiness and irritability
- Lower sexual desire and/or difficulty maintaining an erection
- Difficulty concentrating and remembering

Sleep Apnea



Sleep Labs Can Monitor Patients During Overnight Stay

GETTING A DIAGNOSIS: Sleep apnea is assessed with a sleep study, which uses stick-on sensors to measure things such as breathing, heart rate, brain activity, and body movements while asleep. The study can be done during an overnight stay in a sleep center/lab (called polysomnography) or at home. Home testing collects less information but may be more convenient for straightforward cases.



Jennifer Garner in the 2023 comedy "Family Switch."

How Is Sleep Apnea Treated?

Either one or a combination of the following are typically involved



CPAP

Continuous Positive Airway Pressure is the most common treatment; it pumps air through a mask to help the throat stay open when sleeping.

ORAL APPLIANCE

For milder sleep apnea an oral appliance (also called a mandibular advancement device), similar to a mouth guard, helps keep the airway open by moving the jaw forward.

POSITIONAL THERAPY

Positional therapy is helpful for people who mostly have sleep apnea when they are lying on their back—for example, devices that buzz when you roll on your back, or a wearable cushion that keeps them sleeping on their side.

SURGERY

Surgery to widen the airway, usually involving the nose, tongue, palate or jaw.

DEVICE IMPLANT

Hypoglossal nerve stimulation involves a small device implanted in the chest wall that triggers muscles to keep the airway open and continue breathing (about the size of a pacemaker).

MEDICATION

Medications may be prescribed to help people stay awake if they are still having difficulty despite other treatments such as CPAP.

LIFESTYLE CHANGES

Helpful lifestyle changes could include keeping healthy sleep habits, developing a regular movement practice, avoiding alcohol before bed, and quitting smoking.

The Ball's in Your Court, Hollywood

According to multiple studies, a lack of adequate sleep is associated with increases in obesity, diabetes, hypertension, incident cardiovascular disease, stroke, depression, substance abuse, and increased death rates.

Stories with characters living with sleep apnea are not just relatable to the 54 million adults going through a similar situation, they actually help normalize this not uncommon sleep disorder.

They can inspire the tired and grumpy masses to seek out a diagnosis, get treatment, and wake up feeling rested for the first time in years.

Representation can be as simple as a CPAP mask resting on a nightstand, or a character putting on a mask before bed (if you're feeling feisty).

Just think how nice it'll be to have legions of happy, well-rested fans who owe their life to you! Think of the power!

Sleep apnea affects a wide variety of people, including people of all sizes, genders and ages. Yes, women can have sleep apnea too.

SOCIAL SUPPORT: Connecting with other people who have sleep apnea can empower people to cope with the disorder and learn strategies to manage symptoms and treatments.