Sleep Apnea: Risks & Signs

A 2019 study\(^7\) estimated that at least 730 million people suffer with sleep apnea globally. According to the Cleveland Clinic, sleep apnea is diagnosed “when you stop breathing for 10 seconds or longer — at least five times an hour — during sleep.”

Sleep apnea is a treatable condition. However, if left untreated it can pose significant health risks, including sudden cardiac death. For that reason, it is important to take risk factors seriously.

Risk Factors for Sleep Apnea

**Weight.** While not perfect, the body mass index (BMI) is a quick way to assess your weight. Being overweight, defined as a BMI between 25-29.9, is linked to an increased risk for sleep apnea.

**Smoking.** Smoking is associated with increased pulmonary inflammation, which also increases the risk of developing sleep apnea.

**Neck Circumference.** A wide neck circumference, often accompanied by excess body weight, has been linked to a higher incidence of sleep apnea.

**Comorbidities.** Sleep apnea is common in the presence of other health conditions, such as congestive heart failure, hypertension, diabetes, polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), and asthma.

**Male.** Men have a higher incidence of sleep apnea than women, and there have also been an increased number of cases reported in individuals undergoing female-to-male gender reassignment\(^8\).

Signs of Sleep Apnea

**Snoring loudly.** Loud snoring is one of the most common signs of sleep apnea, and sleepless partners are often the first to detect it.

**Gasping or choking during sleep.** While gasping during sleep is also tied to other medical conditions, such as acid reflux and post-nasal drip, it is also a common sign of sleep apnea.

**Morning headaches.** Prolonged bouts of oxygen deprivation can cause headaches, especially in the morning.

If you are concerned that you might have some risk factors or signs of sleep apnea, schedule an appointment with your doctor as soon as possible. A referral to a sleep specialist may be necessary.

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\(^7\) https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600(19)30196-5

\(^8\) https://jasm.org/rising-prevalence-of-sleep-apnea-in-u-s-threatens-public-health/

\(^9\) https://doi.org/10.5684/jcsm.8010