

Sleep Apnea



Overview

This is a breathing disorder. With it, your breathing becomes irregular when you sleep. Your breaths may become shallow. Your breathing may stop completely for extended periods of time. This severely disrupts your sleep.

Causes

The most common form of sleep apnea results from obstruction of your airway. This can be caused by obesity, which leads to thickened pads of fat in the throat and neck. You may have an obstructed airway because of the structure of your head and neck. You may have enlarged tonsils or an oversized tongue. As your muscles relax during sleep, these obstructions can limit your airflow. Sleep apnea can also be caused by an inability of your brain to properly control your breathing.

Symptoms

Symptoms of sleep apnea often include loud, chronic snoring. You may intermittently stop breathing and then make choking or gasping sounds as you sleep. If you sleep alone, you may not be aware of these nighttime symptoms. But sleep apnea can also affect your waking hours. You may have headaches in the morning. You may feel drowsy, irritable and unfocused during the day.

Treatment

Sleep apnea can often be treated with changes in lifestyle. You may benefit from losing weight. You may be encouraged to stop smoking and to avoid alcohol and certain medications. You may benefit from devices that keep your airway open during sleep. You may use a continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) device. This gently forces air into your nose and mouth while you sleep. You can also wear a mouthpiece. If these methods are not helpful, you may benefit from surgery to eliminate obstructions. Your healthcare provider can create a care plan that is right for your needs.

