



Sleep Apnea - Sleep Disorder

According to the National Sleep Foundation, approximately 18 million Americans have a form of sleep apnea. It affects both men and women of any age. As with any other sleep disorder, it is important to identify the underlying cause of sleep apnea before an effective treatment program can begin. Early recognition and treatment of this sleep disorder is important because it can be associated with an irregular heartbeat, high blood pressure, heart attacks or strokes. The specialists at the Diagnostic Sleep Center of the LaPorte Regional Health System are experienced in the diagnosis and treatment options of sleep apnea.

What is Sleep Apnea?

Sleep apnea is a serious, potentially life-threatening condition characterized by brief, frequent interruptions of breathing during sleep. Individuals who have sleep apnea usually snore loudly, are frequently overweight, have high blood pressure, and may have structural abnormalities in the nose, throat or other part of the upper airway.

There are four types of sleep apnea: central, obstructive, hypopnea and mixed. *Obstructive apnea* is by far most common. It occurs when a blockage does not allow air to flow freely in the cavities of the nose, mouth, throat and lungs, although efforts to breathe continue. A blockage can be caused by:

- ▶ Enlarged tonsils and adenoids
- ▶ A relaxing of throat muscles, tongue, or muscles of the soft palate at the base of the tongue and uvula (a small fleshy tissue hanging from the center of the back of the throat).
- ▶ Excess amount of tissue that causes a narrowed airway.

Hypopnea apnea occurs when there is a partial obstruction that still affects the oxygen saturation in body and causes sleep disruption and wakefulness.

Central apnea occurs when the part of the brain that controls breathing doesn't start or maintain the breathing process properly. It is the least common form of apnea and usually has a neurological cause.

Mixed apnea is a combination of central and obstructive apnea. It is seen particularly in infants or young children who have abnormal control of breathing, and can occur when a child is awake or asleep.

How Apnea Affects People

The consequences of sleep apnea can range from annoying to life threatening. It causes serious disturbances in normal sleep patterns. As a result, individuals affected by sleep apnea often feel very sleepy during the day, so their concentration and work performance may suffer. They can experience depression, irritability, sexual dysfunction, learning and memory difficulties, or falling asleep while at work, on the phone or driving. In children, it can cause poor school performance, morning headaches, discipline problems or failure to thrive. Some children can become hyperactive or aggressive.

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Because the symptoms and behaviors of sleep apnea are common to several sleep disorders, the diagnosis can be challenging. Diagnostic tests available at the Diagnostic Sleep Center include:

- ▶ Polysomnography—Records a variety of body functions during sleep. It is used to diagnose sleep apnea and determine its severity.
- ▶ Multiple Sleep Latency Test (MSLT)—Measures the speed of falling asleep. Individuals who fall asleep in less than five minutes are likely to require some type of treatment for sleep disorders.

Prevention And Treatment

A specific therapy for sleep apnea is tailored to each individual based on medical history, a physical examination and the results of the polysomnography. For obstructive sleep apnea, treatments can include:

- ▶ Physical or mechanical therapy — A nasal Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) is the most common effective treatment. It is a nasal mask that uses pressure from an air blower to keep the nasal passages open during sleep. Dental appliances can be used to re-position the lower jaw and tongue in people with mild to moderate sleep apnea.
- ▶ Surgery — Removal of the tonsils and adenoids (especially in children), nasal polyps, other growths, or tissue in the airway, and correction of structural deformities can provide relief. A procedure called uvulopalatopharyngoplasty (UPPP) involves removing tissue at the back of the throat (tonsils, uvula and part of the soft palate). Laser-assisted uvulopalatopharyngoplasty (LAUP) can decrease or eliminate snoring. A tracheostomy is used for life-threatening sleep apnea. Surgical reconstruction may be used for people who have deformities in the lower jaw.
- ▶ Non-specific therapy — Behavioral changes are an important part of any treatment program, and in some cases, may be all that is needed. These can include weight loss programs, avoiding the use of alcohol and sleeping pills, and using pillows and other devices to help individuals sleep in a position that avoids blockage of the airway.



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of La Porte Regional Health System

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