

[IMAGE]

Sleep Apnea: What Are the Risks?

By Julie T. Chen, MD

Sleep apnea may or may not be something most of you have heard about. But I bet someone you know has it but either they or you or both don't know about it.

Sleep apnea is the term we use when someone has episodes of not breathing while they are asleep. This can occur for many reasons and we'll definitely get to that, but let's first start with some signs or symptoms that frequently occur with sleep apnea so you can see if you or a loved one need to be evaluated for it.

There are a lot of symptoms that can occur with sleep apnea but some of the most common ones are fatigue, foggy memory, frequent headaches, snoring while sleeping, and if your spouse says you stop breathing in the middle of the night while you sleep but you are unaware. If you have any of these symptoms, you should check with your physician about getting a sleep study done to see if you have sleep apnea.

Some of the common risk factors for sleep apnea are basically anything that might cause your airway passages to be closed off or if you have any brain trauma that might cause your natural regulation of breathing to be off. The more common version is the obstructive kind and that can occur if you are overweight or obese, have a short distance between your chin and throat, and if there are excess tissue in your nasal or oral/throat passage ways that might obstruct your breathing. Sometimes, if your allergies are really bad, your breathing passageway tissue can get swollen from your allergy issues and close off your passageway that way as well.

[sleep apnea - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark So](#), what should you do if you're concerned?

First things first, you need to ask your doctor to examine you and you will need a sleep study to see what your sleep pattern is like at night and see if you are in fact not breathing for parts of the night while you sleep.

Second, if you have allergies, you need to see your allergist and your otolaryngologist (ear, nose, and throat doctor) to see if there's any issues in this department that might be keeping you from optimal oxygenation at night. You may also want to invest in a HEPA air filter and dust mite covers if you are dust mite sensitive to

help with removal of both airborne and bedding-associated allergens in your room at night.

Lastly, if you are overweight or obese, you need to talk to your doctor about helping you with weight loss so that the excess tissue doesn't block your air passageways at night when you are lying down and sleeping.

Many of you may be wondering why this matters...why do you have to address this issue of sleep apnea. The reason is because closing off your passageways at night and not breathing is a strain to your heart and lungs as well as your brain. And in my opinion, those are three very important organs we want to keep healthy, don't you agree?

So, if you are at all suspicious that you or a loved one might have it, just check with your doctor about your concerns. Because at the end of the day, what's the worst that can happen? You either don't have it and you have a peace of mind about it; or you have it and you finally get help and treatment for it...which your brain, heart and lungs will definitely thank you for it long into your later years.

Dr. Julie T. Chen is board-certified in internal medicine and fellowship-trained and board-certified in integrative medicine. She has her own medical practice in San Jose, Calif. She is the medical director of corporation wellness at several Silicon Valley-based corporations, is on several medical expert panels of Web sites and nonprofit organizations, is a recurring monthly columnist for several national magazines, and has been featured in radio, newspaper, and magazine interviews. She incorporates various healing modalities into her practice including, but is not limited to, medical acupuncture, Chinese scalp acupuncture, clinical hypnotherapy, strain-counterstrain osteopathic manipulations, and biofeedback. To learn more, visit www.makinghealthyez.com.

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