

MEDfacts

An Educational Health Series From National Jewish Health®



SLEEP DISORDERS

Most people, children and adults, have problems with getting a good night's sleep from time to time. To help get a good night's sleep, it is often recommended that you exercise on a regular basis, maintain a regular sleeping schedule, avoid stimulants such as caffeine before bed, avoid alcohol and a large meal before bed and establish a comfortable sleeping environment.

For some people, lack of restful sleep is a constant and potentially dangerous problem. People may have a medical condition known as a **sleep disorder**. A sleep disorder interferes with the body's ability to sleep normally. For many people, it is a chronic, nightly problem that can influence daytime behavior. Activities at work and school, and relationships with loved ones can be seriously affected. A sleep disorder can worsen already existing medical conditions and lead to new medical problems.

What are Common Sleep Disorders?

Sleep disorders are very common and include the following conditions: Obstructive sleep apnea, insomnia, narcolepsy, restless leg syndrome, periodic limb movement disorder and circadian rhythm disorders.

Obstructive Sleep Apnea

Obstructive sleep apnea is a condition in which the airway narrows or closes during sleep. This is often a result of blockage by the tongue or other soft tissues. This can lead to loud snoring and lapses in breathing that can occur hundreds of times a night. This breathing interruption can lead to irregular heartbeats and high blood pressure. In addition, a person may be sleepy enough to fall asleep while driving, causing accidents, poor memory and unexplained changes in behavior.

Though it can be easily diagnosed in a sleep lab, many people with obstructive sleep apnea are not aware that they have a sleep

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disorder. A family member often informs the health care provider of a person's sleep history or daytime symptoms. This leads to an evaluation for a possible sleep disorder.

Insomnia

Insomnia refers to the person's inability to "fall asleep" and/or to "stay asleep" long enough to feel rested. It is the most common of all sleep-related complaints and may be the main symptom for a variety of sleep disorders.

Narcolepsy

A person with narcolepsy may experience sleep episodes lasting seconds to minutes that occur at unusual times during the day. These periods of sleep may occur while reading, watching television or driving. Some people with narcolepsy may experience **cataplexy** as well. Cataplexy is the sudden loss of muscle tone in the face or extremities and is triggered by emotions, such as laughter, anger or surprise.

Restless Leg Disorder

Restless leg disorder is a condition that usually affects a person during the evening or early morning, although symptoms can occur at any time. It is described as a restless, uncomfortable feeling in the lower legs. Restless leg syndrome can make it very difficult for a person to fall asleep.

Periodic Limb Movement Disorder

Periodic limb movement disorder is a condition that causes movement of the legs and/or arms during sleep. These movements may cause frequent, brief interruptions of sleep.

Circadian Rhythm Disorder

Circadian rhythm disorder is suspected when someone has difficulty falling asleep during the typical sleep times. People have an internal 24-hour sleep/wake cycle referred to as circadian rhythm. The internal "clock" of people with circadian rhythm disorder may tell them to fall asleep too early in the evening or too late at night.

How is a Sleep Disorder Diagnosed?

When a sleep disorder is suspected, your doctor should do a complete history and physical. Your doctor may have you and your sleep partner fill out a sleep survey or diary. Remember, it is often a family member who provides the health care provider with the needed information about a person's sleep habits. Based on this information, your health care provider may then recommend a Sleep Study.

What is a Sleep Study?

A Sleep Study is a painless session that monitors your sleep through the night and is usually performed in a sleep lab. A sleep lab is a specialized unit staffed by a team of health care providers and other specialists who have expertise in the study and treatment of sleep disorders.

Breathing, heart rate, oxygen level, eye movement and brain waves are monitored during a sleep study. A sleep study can help your health care provider make a comprehensive diagnosis and will allow him/her to make recommendations for the treatment of your sleep problem.

What is the Treatment?

Treatment varies with the specific sleep disorder. Treatment can be as simple as a change in sleep position or it may include the use of medication or the need for surgery.

A common treatment for obstructive sleep apnea includes the use of a machine called CPAP (Continuous Positive Airway Pressure). The CPAP machine delivers air pressure into the airway to keep the airways open during sleep.

The Sleep Center at National Jewish Health

The Sleep Center at National Jewish Health is a comprehensive sleep medicine clinic and sleep lab. The Sleep Center is staffed by experts in the field of Sleep Medicine and utilizes state-of-the-art technology. An evaluation at The Sleep Center provides a comprehensive diagnosis and a full range of therapies to people suffering from a variety of sleep disorders.

Note: This information is provided to you as an educational service of LUNG LINE® (1-800-222-LUNG) at National Jewish Health. It is not meant to be a substitute for consulting with your own physician.

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