

# Sleep Apnea Fact Sheet

## The Facts About Sleep Apnea

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- Sleep apnea is a serious, potentially life-threatening condition.
- Sleep apnea causes pauses in breathing during sleep, and robs its sufferers of the good, quality sleep needed to be fully alert during the rest of the day.
- Sleep apnea often goes unrecognized and untreated.
- Left untreated, sleep apnea increases one's risk for high blood pressure, motor vehicle crashes, heart attack, stroke, and other medical conditions.
- Sleep apnea can be successfully treated and shouldn't interfere with job duties as long as the patient complies with their treatment.

## The Facts About Sleep Apnea and Commercial Drivers

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- Commercial drivers are at an increased risk of having sleep apnea. According to a Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration study, almost one-third of commercial drivers have some degree of sleep apnea.
- Untreated sleep apnea causes excessive daytime sleepiness, which impairs judgment, causes attention deficits, slows reaction times, and decreases alertness.
- Untreated sleep apnea greatly increases a driver's risk for being involved in a fatigue-related motor vehicle crash.
- Sleep apnea is a highly treatable disorder. Drivers who are treated should be able to do their job as safely as those who do not have sleep apnea.

## Risk Factors for Sleep Apnea

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Sleep apnea occurs in all age groups and both sexes, but there are a number of factors that may put you at higher risk:

- A family history of sleep apnea
- Having a small upper airway
- Being overweight
- Having a recessed chin, small jaw, or a large overbite
- A large neck size (17 inches or greater for men, 16 inches or greater for women)
- Smoking and alcohol use
- Being age 40 or older
- Ethnicity

## Symptoms of Sleep Apnea

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- Loud snoring
- Morning headaches and nausea
- Gasping or choking while sleeping
- Loss of sex drive/impotence
- Excessive daytime sleepiness
- Irritability and/or feelings of depression
- Disturbed sleep
- Concentration and memory problems
- Frequent nighttime urination

## Diagnosing Sleep Apnea

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In order to diagnose sleep apnea, your doctor will probably send you to a sleep disorders center for testing. You may be asked to spend a night or two at the center, where experts will monitor your sleep. A sleep study test (polysomnography) will determine if you have sleep apnea and how severe it is. If you are diagnosed with sleep apnea, you may benefit from both lifestyle changes and specific medical treatment.

## Lifestyle Changes

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- **Lose weight** — Overweight persons can help treat their sleep apnea with even moderate weight loss. For instance, a 200-pound man can lose 20 pounds and greatly reduce the number of breathing pauses.
- **Avoid alcohol and sleeping pills** — Both alcohol and sleeping pills slow down breathing and make sleep apnea symptoms worse.
- **Sleep on your side or stomach** — Some people suffer from sleep apnea only when lying on their backs. Try using pillows to avoid sleeping on your back.
- **Quit smoking** — Cigarette smoking increases both the risk and the severity of sleep apnea, by causing swelling and excess mucus in the airways and by damaging the lungs.

## Medical Treatment

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- **Continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP)** — This is a highly effective form of treatment. CPAP treatment involves wearing a mask over the nose during sleep while gentle air pressure from a blower prevents the throat from collapsing during sleep. A CPAP device is portable, so you can take it on the road.
- **Oral appliances** — Some sleep apnea patients are helped by devices that open the airway by bringing the lower jaw or tongue forward.
- **Surgery** — Some patients may choose surgery for their sleep apnea. Although several procedures are used to increase the size of the airway, none of them are completely successful in all patients or without risks. More than one procedure may need to be tried before the patient realizes any benefits.

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