

SLEEP DISORDERS

Sleep Apnea

This is defined as the cessation of breathing for at least 10 seconds or more. This disorder occurs when the upper airway becomes completely or partially blocked, interrupting regular breathing for short periods of time. It can cause severe daytime sleepiness, and evidence is building that left untreated, severe sleep apnea may be associated with high blood pressure and risk for stroke and heart attack. Sleep apnea was thought to be a disorder primarily of overweight, middle-aged (or older) men. However, abnormal breathing during sleep (sleep disordered breathing) can affect persons of any age and either sex, and at least 30% of those are not obese. Most people with sleep apnea have a smaller than normal inner throat and other subtle bone and soft-tissue differences. Most awakenings occur when an increased effort is required to overcome the obstruction of the airway.

Snoring

This noise is produced when the air inhaled rattles over the relaxed tissues of the throat. Snoring can be a marker of a more serious sleep problem called "sleep apnea." Sometimes snoring is caused by allergies, asthma, or nasal deformities that make breathing difficult.

Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS)

In those who have restless legs syndrome, discomfort in the legs and feet peaks during the evening and night. They may feel an urge to move their legs and feet to get temporary relief. This can delay sleep onset and cause brief awakening during sleep. This is a common problem among middle-aged and older adults. There are many causes of RLS. Stronger associations include kidney failure, some nerve disorders, vitamin deficiencies, pregnancy, iron deficiency, and some medications. About 50% of those with RLS have relatives with the same condition.

Narcolepsy

This is a brain/nerve disorder that causes excessive daytime sleepiness. There is a genetic component, but most patients have no family history of the problem. The cause of narcolepsy is not clear. There is a link between narcolepsy and proteins used by the immune system to recognize foreign material. Genetic and environmental factors likely play roles, too. There are some rare nerve disorders that can cause what seems to be narcolepsy.

Night Terrors and Sleepwalking

These events occur during NREM sleep and occur mostly in children between the ages of 3 and 5. A night terror can be dramatic with a child screaming and unable to explain what scared him or her. Sleepwalkers can perform an extensive range of activities, some potentially dangerous (such as leaving the house), while they continue to sleep. They may be triggered by a frightening or stressful event, a fever or illness. They are most common in children, but adults can have them as well if they are experiencing emotional or psychological problems. Persistent night terrors can be triggered by obstructive sleep apnea syndrome.

Insomnia

People who do not get enough sleep at night may suffer from insomnia. They may have trouble falling asleep or may wake up frequently during the night or early in the morning. Insomnia has many causes, including stress, anxiety, poor sleep habits, depression, disorders of the internal clock (such as jet lag) and is a side effect of many medications.