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Patients with Heart Disease Need to be Screened for Sleep Disorder

There is strong medical evidence of a link between Sleep Apnea and Cardiovascular diseases such as hypertension, arrhythmia, stroke and heart failure. As a physician, board certified in Sleep Medicine, I feel a great responsibility to share this information, increase awareness, and ultimately, save lives. If you or a loved one displays any sign of sleep apnea as mentioned in this article, or has recently been diagnosed with cardiovascular disease, please talk to your doctor. You may need to schedule an overnight diagnostic sleep study (polysomnogram) at an accredited sleep clinic, such as Sleep Clinic of America.

Most people associate sleep apnea with loud snoring, but the important thing to look for here is breathing. People with sleep apnea tend to have periods when he or she stops breathing and nothing can be heard. Then, suddenly they snort, gasp, choke, or snore and breathing is resumed. Unless the problem is noticed by a roommate or bed partner, a person may not even know they have sleep apnea. Meanwhile, Sleep Apnea takes its toll, setting the stage for hypertension.

Blood pressure tends to go up when a person with sleep apnea sleeps. This is because when breathing stops, the oxygen level in his or her body goes down, and receptors are stimulated to alert the brain that there is a problem. In response, the brain sends signals through the nervous system and essentially tells the blood vessels to "tighten up" in order to increase the flow of oxygen to the most vital organs: the heart and the brain. The problem is that this message tends to carry over in the daytime, even when the sleep apnea patient is awake and breathing normally. High blood pressure suddenly becomes a problem, and may be difficult to manage. This in turn increases the risk factor for heart disease and stroke.

There is good news however. We have found that If you treat people with high blood pressure and sleep apnea using CPAP therapy, their blood pressure is not only lower at night—it's also lower during the day. Patients with heart failure and sleep apnea also showed significant improvement. Patients with atrial fibrillation and sleep apnea that are appropriately treated have only a 40% chance of coming back for further treatment of their atrial fibrillation. If their sleep apnea is untreated, the chance of a recurrence of atrial fibrillation goes up to 80%. The message to heart patients with sleep apnea is clear: With treatment of your sleep apnea, your chances of improvement are considerably better.

Dr. Dacelin St. Martin is board-certified in sleep, internal, and pediatric medicine. He is the medical director of the "Sleep Clinic of America" in Lecanto, which is accredited by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine. If you have any questions, contact him at Sleep Clinic of America, 1980 N. Prospect Ave., Lecanto, FL 34461, call 352-52SNORE (527-6673), or visit www.SleepClinicAmerica.com.