

(8) Health Risks Associated with Untreated Obstructive Sleep Apnea

(Sleepeducation.com-from the American Academy of Sleep Medicine)

Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) is a common sleep disorder that involves pauses in breathing during sleep. If left untreated, OSA can have a detrimental impact on your health and well-being.

OSA occurs when your muscles relax during sleep. This causes soft tissue in the back of the throat to collapse and block the airway. Breathing pauses can last from 10 seconds to a minute or longer. The pauses end when the body briefly wakes up to gasp for breath. This repetitive cycle of breathing pauses continues all night long. A person with severe OSA may have hundreds of breathing pauses per night.

These breathing pauses produce drastic changes in blood pressure and oxygen levels, while also fragmenting sleep. Over time, untreated OSA puts a tremendous amount of stress on the body, increasing your risk for many other health problems. These are eight of the health risks related to OSA:

1. High blood pressure

Studies have shown that OSA can cause high blood pressure, also known as "hypertension." The amount of increase in blood pressure is related to the severity of OSA; more severe OSA produces greater increases in blood pressure. Elevations in blood pressure even can occur in children who have OSA.

2. Heart disease

Untreated OSA is a risk factor for heart disease, which is the leading cause of death in the U.S. as of 2005. OSA increases your risk for an irregular heartbeat, coronary artery disease, heart attack and congestive heart failure. A 2006 study in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology* found that OSA even affects the shape of your heart. Results show that the hearts of people with OSA are enlarged on one side, have thickened walls and a reduced pump function.

3. Stroke

OSA increases your risk for stroke, the third leading cause of death in the U.S. as of 2005. A stroke is a "brain attack" that occurs when blood flow to the brain is interrupted. It can result from either a blood clot that blocks an artery or from a broken blood vessel.

4. Brain damage

A study in the journal *Sleep* in 2008 provided visual evidence of brain damage that occurs in people with OSA. The damage affects brain structures that help control functions such as memory, mood and blood pressure.

5. Depression

Research shows that depression is common in people with OSA. Even mild OSA gives you a much greater risk of depression. This risk for depression increases with the severity of OSA.

6. Diabetes

OSA is associated with impaired glucose tolerance and insulin resistance. Type 2 diabetes, a leading cause of death in the U.S., occurs when the body fails to use insulin effectively. Research suggests that OSA can contribute to the onset of diabetes.

7. Obesity

Obesity is a key risk factor for OSA. But there is increasing evidence that OSA also may promote weight gain. OSA can fragment sleep, reducing daytime energy and physical activity. It also can disrupt metabolism. OSA may alter the levels of hormones that regulate your appetite, which may lead you to eat more.

8. Mortality

Two studies in the journal *Sleep* in 2008 show that people with sleep apnea have a much higher risk of death than people without sleep apnea. The risk is greater for people whose sleep apnea is more severe. The risk of death also increases when sleep apnea is untreated.

There is hope for people who have OSA; it can be treated with a high rate of success. A growing body of research even shows that treating OSA with continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) therapy can reduce many of these eight health risks.

You can get expert help for OSA at a sleep disorders center that is accredited by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine.

The Center for Sleep Medicine

