

# Apnea: No Time to Sleep On It!

**T**welve million Americans suffer from sleep apnea—nightly bouts of interrupted, oxygen-deprived sleep when the soft tissue part in the back of the throat, in the upper airway collapses, blocking the passage of air in and out.

But feeling tired is the least significant consequence of this disorder. According to a landmark study by lung experts at Johns Hopkins and six other U.S. medical centers, sleep apnea raises the chances of dying in middle-aged to elderly people by as much as 46 percent in the most severe cases. Even in people with moderate forms of the sleeping disorder, risk of death jumps to 17 percent.

Though the medical community has long hinted at the connection between sleep problems and death, especially from heart disease, this study is the first to define death from sleep apnea by monitoring a large number of people with or without sleep apnea—including a high number of snorers—to see who dies and who does not. The study involved 6,441 men and women between the ages of 40 and 70, with mild to severe forms of sleep apnea or none at all. Some 1,047 deaths occurred among study participants since the clinical investigation began.



“Our study results really raise concern about the potentially harmful effects of sleep apnea,” says Johns Hopkins pulmonologist and study site principal investigator Naresh Punjabi, M.D.,

Ph.D. He explains that low blood oxygen levels during sleep are a particularly worrisome sign, a factor that is the single biggest predictor of death in people with sleep disorders.

Dr. Punjabi strongly urges people who think they may have sleep apnea to talk with their doctor to explore treatment options, such as behavioral or lifestyle changes,

or CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure), a device, which resembles an oxygen mask and forces air into the nasal passages, preventing the airways from collapsing.

## Signs you may have sleep apnea:

- Feeling tired or drowsy during the day
- Poor nighttime sleep quality
- Recurrent awakenings from sleep
- Reports from your bed partner that you snore loudly or intermittently stop breathing

For a video about sleep apnea and CPAP, visit

[hopkinsbayview.org/sleep](http://hopkinsbayview.org/sleep)

## Dr. Punjabi recommends the following for those with sleep apnea:

- **Lose weight.** Over half of the sufferers of sleep apnea are overweight. By losing weight, people not only decrease their risk of developing sleep apnea, but for those who already have it, weight loss can substantially reduce the disease severity and in some cases, eliminate it.
- **Practice good sleep hygiene.** For example, avoid alcohol and caffeine several hours before going to bed.
- **Sleep on your side.** In some people, sleeping on their side may improve breathing patterns. There are some people with positional sleep apnea. That is, sleep apnea worsens when these patients sleep on their back. It is these patients who benefit from sleeping on their side.
- **Stop smoking.** Smoking can increase the swelling in the upper airway which may worsen both snoring and apnea.

The best way to determine if you have sleep apnea is to see a physician specializing in sleep disorders. For more information or to make an appointment at the Johns Hopkins Sleep Clinic, call 410-550-0571 or visit our Web site at [hopkinsbayview.org/sleep](http://hopkinsbayview.org/sleep).