

- Sleep apnoea

Sleep disorder that leaves sufferers gasping for air

Western Daily Press · 18 Mar 2024 · 17 · By Jamel Smith

It's well known that getting enough slumber is essential for our wellbeing – but what about health concerns that arise when we're actually asleep?



A big example is sleep apnoea – a common condition that causes breathing to be interrupted during sleep. As well as resulting in ongoing tiredness, if left untreated, it can potentially cause various health conditions, including heart diseases, diabetes and depression.

What is sleep apnoea?

It's a sleep disorder that causes repeated breathing interruptions during sleep. According to Asthma + Lung UK, obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA) is the most common type of the disorder, impacting approximately one in 20 people. Emma Rubach, head of health advice at Asthma + Lung UK, explains: "Usually when you're sleeping, air can travel freely to and from the lungs via your airways. But with sleep apnoea, the airway collapses – resulting in loud snoring, stopping or struggling to breathe, a feeling of choking or gasping, sudden body movements and waking up during the night."

The condition can also cause headaches, irritability and tiredness during the day.

Who is most at risk?

Experts say obesity, type 2 diabetes, chronic heart conditions and age, are "key risk factors".

Professor Esther Rodriguez Villegas, founder of Acurable, which creates wearable medical devices designed to detect sleep apnoea, says: "The additional weight on the neck, seen in obesity, the tissue structure and changes that occur through ageing, can impact the ability of the throat to remain open at night."

While men have always been thought to be more prone to sleep apnoea, there is now strong evidence that in women the condition is often misdiagnosed or missed entirely, says Prof Villegas.

She adds: "Smoking, alcohol and drug use make sleep apnoea more likely, as they can cause the throat to relax." It's also common in people with conditions such as Down's syndrome, she says.

Can it be life-threatening?

If left untreated, it can lead to diabetes and cardiovascular issues, including high blood pressure and stroke. This is due to sudden drops in blood oxygen during sleep, which increases blood pressure and strains the cardiovascular system, Sleep expert Dr Hana Patel says. "The condition can also cause heart arrhythmias, a problem with the regularity of a person's heartbeat, which can lead to sudden death in those with pre-existing heart problems."

She adds: "It is well documented that untreated sleep apnoea drastically increases the incidence of road collisions, and the lack of regular healthy sleep can also cause depression or anxiety."

How can you treat sleep apnoea?

The condition is commonly treated with a continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) machine – a mask "worn overnight that pushes pressured air into your windpipe to keep it open while sleeping", says Prof Villegas. "There are also a variety of mandibular advancement devices (MADs), which can help hold the jaw and tongue in a position that stops the airway from becoming blocked."

In certain cases, Dr Villegas suggests surgery on the nose, throat and mouth may help correct airway blockages. In children, a common operation such as tonsillectomy may remedy the problem. Sufferers should consider losing weight if necessary, decreasing alcohol consumption and quitting smoking, she adds.