

# TAKE CHARGE of your HEALTH

## Sleep Apnea is a Snore



**Sam Fleishman, M.D.**  
DIRECTOR, SLEEP MEDICINE AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH



We've all had those days when we just don't feel as well rested as we should. Our eyelids droop. We yawn. We may even nod off at our desk or on the bus ride home. Some feel this exhaustion only occasionally. For others, it is a daily experience. And that could be a sign of a serious health problem called sleep apnea.

Sleep apnea is a chronic condition in which a person stops breathing in their sleep many times a night. There are three types of sleep apnea, but according to Sam Fleishman, M.D., Director of Sleep Medicine and Behavioral Health at Cape Fear Valley Health, obstructive sleep apnea is the most common type.

"the carbon dioxide in the body increases as oxygen decreases. This sends an alert to the brain, which then releases adrenaline throughout the body. This drives up your blood pressure."

The more severe the sleep apnea is, the more obstructions a person experiences and the less likely the blood pressure will dip back down to a normal level.

"If you don't treat the sleep apnea, it's hard to get the blood pressure down," said Dr. Fleishman.

Another danger of untreated sleep apnea is the development of diabetes.

**SLEEP APNEA CAN LEAD TO SERIOUS HEALTH PROBLEMS AND CAN GREATLY INCREASE THE RISK OF AN EARLY DEATH, PARTICULARLY IN AFRICAN AMERICANS, PACIFIC ISLANDERS AND MEXICANS.**

"When you sleep, your tongue and the soft palette at the roof of your mouth relax," Dr. Fleishman said. "These can then drop down and obstruct your airway, preventing you from getting enough air into your lungs."

Because of the soft tissue blocking the airway, snoring is an indication that you may have sleep apnea.

"It's much like when you let the air out of a balloon," Dr. Fleishman said. "When you hold the neck and release the air it makes a flapping sound. This can also happen when tissue obstructs the airway during sleep, causing one to snore."

Left untreated, sleep apnea can lead to serious health problems and can greatly increase the risk of an early death, particularly in African Americans, Pacific Islanders and Mexicans.

"Sleep apnea can cause significant impact on your cardiovascular system," Dr. Fleishman said. "It can increase your risk factors for high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke and heart arrhythmias. It can shorten your life span significantly."

How can lack of sleep cause your blood pressure to increase?

"If you're having airway obstructions all night," said Dr. Fleishman,

"About 50 to 70 percent of people with type 2 diabetes have obstructive sleep apnea," said Dr. Fleishman. "When people have sleep apnea, it actually has an impact on their metabolism."

According to Dr. Fleishman, when you have sleep apnea, your body's leptin levels go down. Leptin is a hormone that affects your appetite. When its levels decrease, you have more difficulty feeling satisfied when you eat. This can cause you to eat more. It may also cause you to crave carbohydrates and sweets. The extra calories can lead to weight gain, leading to insulin resistance and diabetes.

Dr. Fleishman says that sleep apnea is a common problem now – about 15 to 30 percent of the population has it. It is more common in men than women. Signs of sleep apnea include: obesity, having a large neck and a round face, snoring and daytime sleepiness.

"If you have an issue with being sleepy or fatigued, then you should speak to your primary care physician," said Dr. Fleishman. "They can make a decision about whether you need further assessment. It's a very common problem, but it should be taken very seriously."

