

6 Things People With Sleep Apnea Wish You Knew

Snoring might not be simply harmless for people living with sleep apnea.

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Eric Hood via Getty Images

Misinformation persists about obstructive sleep apnea — when you stop breathing briefly and repeatedly during sleep — even though about 18 million Americans have the common condition, according to the [National Sleep Foundation](#).

The number of people with sleep apnea is going up, found a May 2013 [study published in the American Journal of Epidemiology](#). Increases were from 14 to 55 percent over the past two decades, depending on age group and gender.

Does someone you know have sleep apnea? Here are six things that people we interviewed who have sleep apnea say they wish everyone knew.

1. Sleep apnea can run in families. Adam Amdur, 41, of Sarasota, Florida, believes he's had sleep apnea since childhood, though doctors didn't diagnose him with the condition until he was 35. After his diagnosis, he learned that children can inherit facial features — like a recessed chin, large tonsils, or a large overbite, among others — that put them at risk for obstructive sleep apnea. Because of that, he knew what to look for in his daughter. She experienced sleep apnea as a baby, but unlike in his own childhood, she got timely treatment. Amdur believes he saved his daughter from “years of slow, incremental decline — physically and mentally.”

Up to 4 percent of children have sleep apnea, including some who are only 2 years old, according to the [American Sleep Apnea Association](#). “Absolutely, it can be hereditary,” says [Shalini Paruthi, MD](#), a fellow of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine and director of the Pediatric Sleep and Research Center at SSM Cardinal Glennon Children's Medical Center in St. Louis.

2. Women can have sleep apnea, too. Tracy Nasca, 61, who lives in the suburbs of Chicago, wishes more people realized that women can have this common disorder. She suspects that one of the reasons it took doctors 14 years to diagnose her sleep apnea is that they just never thought it was a possibility — because of her gender. “Women just weren't diagnosed with sleep apnea back then,” she says.

Many people mistakenly assume that obstructive sleep apnea is a man's disease, Dr. Paruthi says. But about 4 percent of men, and 2 percent of

women, in the United States have sleep apnea, according to the [World Congress on Sleep Medicine](#).

3. Don't assume snoring is harmless. “Lots of people joke about snoring,” says Robin Simon, 51, of Chicago. “Yes, it can be annoying, but it could also be a sign of something more serious.” She was sharing a hotel room with a friend while on vacation in Italy about five years ago, and her snoring kept both of them up. “When someone complains about your snoring, you should consider that there might be an issue and get it checked out,” Simon says. She did, and she learned she had sleep apnea.

A similar thing happened to Amdur: He was on vacation with a friend who had just graduated from medical school who could hear Amdur's snoring through the hotel walls, and then alerted Amdur to the possibility of sleep apnea.

It's very common for bed partners or family members to say someone is snoring loudly and chronically, or choking or gasping during sleep. That's often how doctors discover sleep apnea, Paruthi says.

4. Not all CPAP machines used to treat sleep apnea are the same. The continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) machine is the most commonly used treatment for sleep apnea. A patient wears a mask over his or her nose and mouth at night. The mask attaches to a machine that provides continuous airway pressure and keeps the nasal passages open. Other sleep apnea treatments include adjustable airway pressure devices and expiratory positive airway pressure, as well as oral appliances to keep the throat open, [notes the Mayo Clinic](#).

Nasca had no success with the first CPAP machine she tried. “It was a failure,” she says. But then she tried a bi-level machine, which changes pressure between inhaled and exhaled, and “it was an instant success.” For the

first time in years that she could remember, she would wake up “feeling alert, and without a headache.”

5. You don't have to be overweight to have sleep apnea. Nasca believes that her significant weight gain after her children were born contributed to her sleep disturbance. But even after she lost weight through bariatric surgery, she still had sleep apnea. “My tongue didn't lose an ounce,” she says. Paruthi notes that in her experience, people who are overweight are at higher risk for sleep apnea, but she has treated thin people for the condition, too.

6. Sleep apnea should never be ignored. “I wish people knew that sleep apnea never gets better if left untreated. It only gets worse,” Nasca says. Untreated sleep apnea can cause you to develop other serious health problems, including diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, and weight gain, Paruthi says. Complications can also include daytime fatigue because of being repeatedly awakened at night, and could cause your partner to become [sleep-deprived](#), notes the [Mayo Clinic](#).

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