

Sleep apnea, sleepless nights

By Johanna Weidner, Record staff Fri Apr 15 2011

WATERLOO REGION — Sleep apnea is a common problem, but thankfully treatment can deliver dramatic improvement within just a few days for people suffering from the sleep disorder.

“It can turn around their life,” said Dr. Anil Nagpal, a Kitchener respiratory medicine and sleep disorders specialist. “Sleep apnea often responds very quickly.”

About half the patients Nagpal sees are coming into his office for diagnosis and treatment of sleep disorders, including obstructive sleep apnea.

Basically, sleep apnea is when a person’s airway narrows or closes while sleeping. As blood oxygen levels drop, the brain reacts to the problem and wakes the sleeper briefly to start breathing again.

“That can happen numerous times throughout the night,” Nagpal said. “You don’t get a good, deep sleep.”

Episodes can happen hundreds of times a night. Sleep apnea is considered severe if a person has 30 or more events an hour. Fifteen to 30 is considered moderate and five to 15 mild. Up to five is normal.

“People often wake up feeling unrefreshed,” Nagpal said, adding that people generally need seven to eight hours of sleep a night.

Sleep broken by episodes of apnea is linked with daytime sleepiness, morning headaches, difficulty concentrating and focusing, memory problems, low mood and more accidents.

“As the sleep apnea becomes progressively worse, so do the symptoms,” Nagpal said. However, he said, “even mild to moderate apnea can be quite disruptive.”

The disorder also puts a strain on the heart and cardiovascular system.

An estimated three per cent of Canadian adults have been diagnosed with sleep apnea. More than one in four reported symptoms and risk factors associated with a high risk of having or developing obstructive sleep apnea, the most common form of the disorder, according to the 2009 Canadian Community Health Survey.

Risk factors include obesity, heredity, enlarged tonsils, low thyroid function and use of sedatives and alcohol, which relax the throat muscles.

Diagnosing sleep apnea is done with a sleep study performed in a lab overnight, during which monitors track what the body is doing during sleep and look for times when a person stops breathing.

Mild cases of sleep apnea can benefit from lifestyle changes, including weight loss, changing the sleep position to the side rather than the back, avoiding alcohol and sedatives, and smoking cessation, Nagpal said.

Surgery is an option for severe cases, but uncommon because it’s not always effective since the blockages can happen in several areas of the airway.

A common treatment is continuous positive airway pressure, or CPAP.

A CPAP machine provides a steady stream of pressurized air through a mask that a person wears while sleeping, keeping the airway open and breathing steady. The mask can cover the mouth and nose, or just the nose. Fitting the mask properly is key to getting the benefits and sticking with the therapy.

“It does take a little getting used to,” Nagpal said.

Although people can see a dramatic improvement in days, he said many don’t continue using the therapy because it can be disruptive and uncomfortable, especially for those with less severe apnea who don’t experience a big change in how they’re feeling.

Dental devices are a good option for mild to moderate cases, although Waterloo dentist Keith Blair said that option is not as well-known as the airway machine.



The majority of people with sleep apnea who come into the Tram Blair Denture Clinic have been frustrated by CPAP therapy.

"It's not overly successful and I think the main reason for that is patient discomfort," Blair said.

Denturists can fit people with an oral appliance resembling a mouth guard to use at night. These devices gently pull the lower jaw forward to prevent the tongue and soft tissue of the throat from blocking the airway while a person sleeps.

Usually made from plastic, the devices barely cover the teeth and allow the mouth to open and close.

"They're small. They're comfortable," Blair said.

And that's why people are more likely to stick with them compared to a CPAP machine, Blair said. They're also a good option when travelling, even for those who like and use CPAP.

A dental professional will take impressions of a person's upper and lower teeth, and then send that to a lab that makes the special devices. Back in the office, it's fitted and adjusted, including followup to ensure optimum comfort and effectiveness.

The cost is about \$1,000, or half that for a temporary appliance to try it out, and may be paid for by extended health coverage.

Along with helping sleep apnea, dental devices can reduce snoring. The majority of people with sleep apnea snore, Nagpal said. That's often why spouses push a person to seek treatment for sleep apnea.

"Spouses are often sleep deprived," Nagpal said.

Treatment of sleep apnea helps a person sleep sounder, get up less during the night, stop tossing and turning, suffer fewer headaches and enjoy renewed energy and improved mood. Nagpal said better sleep may even stabilize chronic health problems, such as high blood pressure.

"There's a global improvement many times."

<http://www.therecord.com/living/healthfitness/article/517437--sleep-apnea-sleepless-nights>