



Sleep Apnea and Orthopedic Surgery: A Dangerous Mix

by Anita Pitock

As common as adult diabetes, yet not as frequently diagnosed, sleep apnea is a disorder in which pauses in breathing or shallow breaths occur during sleep. These pauses can last from a few seconds to minutes and often occur five to 30 times or more in an hour.

Typically, normal breathing will start up again, sometimes with a loud snort or choking sound.

The most common type of sleep apnea is obstructive sleep apnea, in which an individual's airway has collapsed or is blocked. Most people who have sleep apnea don't know it, since it only occurs during sleep. In fact, a family member may first notice the signs.



While sleep apnea can strike anyone at any age – even children – being male, over age 40 and overweight are the biggest risk factors. Case in point, according to the National Institutes of Health, of the 12 million Americans with sleep apnea, more than half are overweight. If you fall into one of these at-risk categories, talk with your family about these warning signs.

ARE YOU:

- a loud and/or regular snorer?
- often fatigued during the day?

DO YOU:

- have frequent pauses in your breathing while sleeping?
- wake up with a headache?
- fall asleep while driving, sitting, reading or watching TV?
- often have problems with your memory or concentration?

Sleep apnea also presents a danger for patients during surgery, including orthopedic surgery. Patients commonly have more complications, such as substantial respiratory and cardiac problems, including irregular heartbeats, lack of blood flow to the heart, and/or problems with breathing. The majority of complications occur in the first 72 hours.

Many obese patients who present to an orthopedic physician actually have undiagnosed sleep apnea. It is critical that these patients are appropriately recognized and evaluated prior to surgery in order to minimize any potential complications related to sleep apnea both during and after surgery.

If you have obstructive sleep apnea or are at risk for it and are scheduled for orthopedic surgery, you should talk with your physician. Ask the following questions:

- What precautions will be taken to monitor me after surgery?
- Is same-day surgery appropriate for me?
- Will my breathing be monitored post-operatively, and for how long?
- How will sleep apnea affect my recovery period?

Remember that when it comes to your health, you are your own best advocate! Anita Pitock is a registered nurse and an associate at Anapol Schwartz. She concentrates her practice in medical malpractice-wrongful death, pharmaceutical liability-dangerous drugs, and major personal injury matters. Contact her at apitock@anapolschwartz.com.