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## The Dangers of Untreated Obstructive Sleep Apnea: What You Need to Know

Sleep apnea, which literally means “without breath during sleep” is a common disorder that results in shallow breathing or pauses in breathing during sleep. According to the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute, these pauses can last from seconds to minutes and can occur up to hundreds of times each night. The brain rouses the sleeper so they can resume breathing normally, resulting in fragmented sleep and daytime fatigue. The sleeper often gives a loud snort or a choking sound before they resume breathing normally.

Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) is caused by a blockage of the airway. Risks for OSA include:

- Being male: men are twice as likely to have sleep apnea as women
- Being overweight
- Having a thick neck
- Smoking: smokers are three times as likely to have sleep apnea as nonsmokers
- Being over 65: older adults are 2-3 times more likely to have sleep apnea than younger people
- Enlarged tonsils or adenoids
- The use of alcohol, sedatives or tranquilizers
- A genetically narrow airway
- A family history of sleep apnea

Untreated sleep apnea can contribute to or exacerbate many health conditions since chronic hypoxia puts a strain on the nervous system. These include cardiovascular problems such as heart attacks, arrhythmias, blocked arteries, and strokes. People with untreated sleep apnea are more likely to die suddenly from heart problems during sleep while sudden death is more common for the first several hours after waking in the general population. Blood pressure is normally lower at night and begins to rise in the morning once you get out of bed. People with untreated sleep apnea often wake up with higher blood pressure due to chronic hypoxia (lack of oxygen) during the night. Many people with treatment resistant high blood pressure may actually have undiagnosed sleep apnea.

Other problems associated with sleep apnea include depression, anxiety, GERD, and a decreased libido. OSA can exacerbate diabetes and there is also evidence that fragmented sleep can trigger seizures in people with epilepsy. New research suggests that untreated OSA can lead to cognitive impairments and, ultimately, dementia. OSA may lead to changes in the volume of certain brain structures that play a critical role in mood and cognition. However, after treatment with a CPAP, structural improvements were noted along with improvements in memory, attention, and executive function skills.

The most common treatment for sleep apnea is a CPAP or continuous positive airway pressure machine. The CPAP, which is used to treat patients with moderate to severe sleep apnea, is designed to break the cycle of sleep apnea by increasing air pressure in the throat and preventing the airway from collapsing.

Due to the dangers of untreated sleep apnea, it is important that patients with this condition use the CPAP as prescribed. It does take some time to adjust to the machine, but patients report improved quality of sleep, less daytime fatigue, and a reduction in cardiovascular and cognitive problems.