



Situational Safety: Sleep Apnea

A person lucky enough to have gotten the recommended eight hours of sleep a night will have spent approximately 22 years of his or her life asleep by age 65. We spend approximately one-third of our lives asleep, repairing our bodies on a cellular level and recharging for the next day. But many people suffer from lack of sleep or poor sleep quality.

Up to 18 million Americans suffer from sleep apnea. The problem stems from a loss of airway muscle tone, causing a collapse of the airway passage which results in a shutdown of air supply to the lungs. Sleep apnea severely compromises sleep quality, even in patients with mild cases. Mild sleep apnea can cause four or more episodes per hour. Patients with severe sleep apnea may be disturbed as often as every 30 seconds. Reduced oxygen to the lungs forces the patient to wake, but only to a semi-consciousness state.¹

One study shows that quality of sleep may be an important risk factor for stroke. This sleep study of more than 1,000 patients revealed a 3-fold increase in the risk of stroke or death in the patients most severely affected by sleep apnea.² Patients should communicate sleeping problems to their doctor, either in the case of sleep apnea or any other condition that causes poor sleep.

In addition to increased risk of stroke, patients suffering from sleep apnea may not always feel alert, which could also increase the risk of injury from falls and other accidents. Patients on warfarin should report any falls to their healthcare team regardless of how minor they appear, as internal bleeding is not always apparent but presents a serious health risk. Only a trained medical professional can determine the severity of injury from a fall.

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1 Munoz, R. (2006). *Stroke: Journal of the American Heart Association*. Retrieved May 2, 2008 from WebMD Web site: <http://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/sleep-apnea/news/20060830/sleep-apnea-ups-stroke-risk-elderly>

2 Yaggi, H.K., et al. (2005). *Obstructive Sleep Apnea as a Risk Factor for Stroke and Death*. Retrieved May 2, 2008 from Web site: <http://content.nejm.org/cgi/content/short/353/19/2034>

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