

Prairie Doc Perspectives

# The Snort That Saved a Life

By Richard P. Holm MD

He was a trucker, and overweight like a lot of these guys and gals who drag freight cross-country, and his wife came with him to make sure that he told everything. He described struggling to stay awake while driving that had been going on for years, but as he's gained weight and grown older the problem's been getting worse. Then, she added, he snores loudly and recently she's heard spells of not breathing followed by a snort, coughing, and up to the bathroom.

This informed wife said to me, "Do you think

he could have sleep apnea?" She was right and the diagnosis was confirmed by a sleep study, and I think treatment saved his life. His was the classic case, which includes a wife who worries about her husband's snorting during sleep.

Sometimes patients with this condition don't come in with such a perfect picture, however. They might have only a morning headache, an irregular heart rhythm, worsening leg swelling, increasing nighttime urinary frequency, anger and memory issues, or even just a dry mouth. Or worse, it may be severe

hypertension, a new heart attack or stroke, or a sleep-induced motor vehicle accident.

Although sleep apnea is more common in men, smokers, the obese, and elderly, it can also occur in women, non-smokers, thin people, and youth... even children. It runs in families with inherited anatomy like short necks, recessed jaws, small nasal passages, and is made worse in those who take tranquilizers, sedatives, or alcohol before bed.

Experts now estimate that at least 12 to 18 million Americans have moderate to severe sleep apnea. That's about five percent of the population

and likely that number is higher since this condition too often goes undiagnosed.

In a 14 year Australian study of 30 to 65 year olds, about seven percent of the people without apnea died over that period of time, while 33percent of those with moderate to severe sleep apnea died... almost a five-fold difference. A similar increase in death rate with sleep apnea was found in a Wisconsin study. Here's good news: there is reduction in death rate with treatment.

Do you think you could have sleep apnea? Don't wait for your wife

to get you to the doctor. Ask about having a sleep study, it could save your life.

Dr. Rick Holm wrote this editorial for "On Call," a weekly program where medical professionals discuss health concerns for the general public. "On Call" is produced by the Healing Words Foundation in association with the South Dakota State University Journalism Department. "On Call" airs Thursdays on South Dakota Public Broadcasting-Television at 7 p.m. Central, 6 p.m. Mountain.

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