

# What you Need to Know about Sleep Apnea and Surgery

## For patients with sleep apnea who are going to have surgery

Read this brochure to learn:

- What sleep apnea is
- Risks of having sleep apnea when going for surgery
- How your health care team will manage your sleep apnea during your hospital stay
- How to take care of yourself at home



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Revised: 04/2015

Form: D-5936

## **What is sleep apnea?**

Sleep apnea can be a serious sleep problem. Sleep apnea means you stop breathing many times during your sleep. It happens because your throat muscles relax, you stop breathing, and then you wake up from your sleep to start breathing again.

This waking and sleeping cycle happens many times when you are trying to sleep. People with sleep apnea may feel very tired and sleepy during the day because they cannot fully rest.

## **How common is sleep apnea?**

Sleep apnea is very common.

- Sleep apnea is more common in men than women.
- Sleep apnea is more common in people who are overweight.
- Many people with normal weight can have sleep apnea too.

**Many patients who come to the hospital for surgery have sleep apnea but do not know that they have it.**

## **Why do I need to know about sleep apnea if I am having surgery?**

Sleep apnea puts you at a higher chance of developing problems during and after surgery. The risks of having surgery are the same when you do not know you have sleep apnea as when you do know, but do not use your breathing machine (PAP machine) as your doctor prescribed.

Sleep apnea can cause problems because of the pain medicines you receive after surgery and the medicines that make you calm or put you to sleep during surgery.

- These medicines relax your throat muscles causing you to stop breathing more often.
- These medicines make it harder to wake up from sleep so you can breathe again.

**Please tell your doctor that you have sleep apnea or make sure you use your breathing machine (PAP machine), if you have one.** It is very important for the doctor and nurses to know that you have sleep apnea so they can watch you closely and plan the best and safest care for you.

## **How do I know if I have sleep apnea?**

You may have sleep apnea if :

- You snore loudly, especially when you are lying flat on your back.
- People notice that you stop breathing during sleep and hear you choke, gasp, and suddenly wake up to take a breath.
- You feel very tired and sleepy during the day.
- You have headaches in the morning.
- You notice problems with your memory and concentration.
- You're irritable, depressed, and always very tired.

## **How will I be assessed for sleep apnea?**

When you come for your check up, your nurse and your anesthesiologist (doctor who gives you anesthetic or pain medicine) will ask you questions about your symptoms. They will measure your neck, check your weight, and take your blood pressure.

If the health care team thinks you have sleep apnea, they may refer you to a sleep doctor for an overnight sleep study before or after surgery. This overnight test will show if you have sleep apnea for sure.

## **How will my health care team manage my sleep apnea in the hospital?**

Before surgery, your anesthesiologist will closely review the type of anesthesia that is best for you and the type of pain medicine you will get after surgery.

If you have a breathing machine (PAP machine), you will need to bring it with you on the day of surgery.

After surgery, your breathing will be checked closely. You may stay for an extra hour in the recovery room or may need to stay in hospital overnight even if you were supposed to go home that day. If you need to stay overnight, do not worry. This is for your safety to make sure that you do not stop breathing because of the medicine.

Your nurse will make sure that you are not sleeping flat on your back. They will check to see that you are either placed up on pillows or lying on your side when you are in bed.

You will use your breathing machine (PAP machine) after your surgery.

The health care team may try different ways to control your pain. If they give you stronger pain medicines to help your pain, they will closely watch how you respond to these medicines to make sure you are not becoming too sleepy.



## When I go home

### What medicine can I take?

To keep safe while you are recovering at home, be sure you:

- **Do not take medicine that makes you sleepy (unless prescribed by your doctor).** Read the label to make sure.
- **Tell your doctor or pharmacist that you have sleep apnea** if you need more pain or anti-nausea medicine so that they can give you medicines that are safe for you.
- **Do not drink alcoholic beverages or smoke while taking your medicines.** This can increase the side effects of the medicines.



## How should I get ready for sleep?

- **Do not sleep flat on your back.**  
Put many pillows under your head. You may also sleep in a chair or on your side.
- **Use your breathing machine (CPAP) or mouth guard (dental device),** if you have them.
- **For the first 24 hours, ask a responsible adult to watch over you while you sleep.** This person will need to make sure that you do not lie flat on your back and will have to check the pressure of your breathing machine (if you are using one) while you sleep.

## What if I have questions?

Ask a member of your health care team if you have any questions about sleep apnea before your surgery or as you prepare to go home.

For more reliable consumer health information about sleep apnea, please visit or contact any of UHN's **Patient and Family Libraries**.

Visit [www.uhnpatienteducation.ca](http://www.uhnpatienteducation.ca) and click "Use our Libraries"