



sleep apnea

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Have you ever been told by your spouse that you snore at night? Do you ever wake up suddenly with a feeling that you are gasping for breath? Do you seem to be sleepy all day long? If you answer yes to any of these questions, then you may be suffering from sleep apnea and you may be surprised that your dentist could possibly treat it.

Sleep apnea is a common sleep disorder characterized by brief interruptions of breathing during sleep. This occurs when the tongue and soft palate collapse onto the back of the throat. This blocks the upper airway, causing airflow to stop. In snoring, the airflow isn't completely blocked, but just vibrates the soft tissue. However, people who snore have a much higher risk of having sleep apnea.

Sleep apnea can be extremely dangerous. The low oxygen levels that patients with apnea experience throughout the night have been linked to heart problems, strokes, as well as a higher incidence of work related and driving accidents due to daytime sleepiness.

The study and diagnosis of sleep apnea is fairly new, and like any new science, there is much to be learned. The recent awareness and improvements in therapy have already led to an improved quality of life for many of our patients.

There are a variety of treatments for sleep apnea. Treatment regimens can include something as simple as an oral appliance that resembles a mouthpiece obtained by your dentist to something as serious as surgery to remove some of the excess soft tissue. Treatment depends on the severity of the disorder. This is determined through a sleep study called a Polysomnogram (PSG), and since sleep apnea is a serious medical condition, a physician must diagnose it.

If you feel you or your spouse might be suffering from sleep apnea, let your health care professional know. It will improve the quality and may even save your life. ■