

# Sleep well

Tools help patients get some shut-eye, prevent serious illness



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THE VILLAGES - Don't fall asleep while reading this article. If you do, you may need the information in it more than ever. The information — sleep.

Most people only think about the quality or quantity of their sleep two times: when they're preparing to get some at night or when they can't shake that sleepy feeling during the day, said sleep physiologist Denver C. Price.

For most people, how they sleep is a relatively low priority in their busy lives. And for those with undiagnosed sleep disorders, that can be dangerous, Price said.

Sleep disorders — the most common being sleep apnea (the slow closing of the windpipe during deeper sleep) — can lead to a series of serious and life-threatening ailments, such as stroke or heart attack.

Other problems sleep disorders can cause are more subtle and can lead to poor driving, low job performance or a lessened ability to think clearly.

"That's the last thing we want is the guy (with sleeping problems) driving the gas truck," said Price, who analyzes sleep patterns at the recently opened Advanced Sleep Diagnostics Center in the Oakland Hills Medical Park in Lady Lake.

Researchers are just beginning to take sleep studies more seriously, which is one of the reasons Price and his wife, Kathy, a registered nurse and sleep technician, are trying to spread the word about the emerging medical field.

"One of the things we do is a lot of public education," said Denver Price. "A lot of people aren't aware there's a problem."

Twenty years ago, the study of sleep disorders was in its infancy.

"Most people thought only old, fat males were having problems. We're finding a lot more people are having problems," he said.

There are about 80 types of sleep disorders; the most common and easily diagnosed is obstructive apnea.

As sufferers fall asleep, their throat muscles begin to relax, which creates a snoring sound as air "tumbles" through narrowing wind channels. Generally speaking, loud and abrupt-sounding snoring is a good indicator that a sleeper has a serious sleep disorder, Price said.

As sleep gets deeper, the channel narrows even more to the point of shutting or severely restricting air flow.

"When the (channel) gets smaller, oxygen falls," Price said. "When that happens, the (process) dumps chemicals, and you wake up. That puts you at a higher risk of stroke and heart attack and sudden death."

For those who suffer with the condition, that abrupt waking or violent stirring can happen several hundred times a night, he said.

"And you never get any restful sleep," Price said. "It's like you're getting poked in the side every couple of minutes."

The condition is often overlooked and misdiagnosed, especially in treating high blood pressure. Sleep disorders also affect a higher percentage — 4 to 10 percent — of the adult population than previously thought, which is about the same percentage as diabetes sufferers.

Price said he's seen blood pressure numbers drop by around 10 points in 90 percent of drug-resistant hypertensives who undergo treatment for sleep disorders. That amount of a drop equates to a 50-percent reduction in stroke risk.

"There's hardly a pill that can do that," he said.

Treatment for minor cases of sleep disorders can be as simple as shifting sleep positions. Price recommends people sleep on their sides, rather than their backs, to make air flow easier and clearer.

Other treatments involve dental devices that push a sufferer's jaw forward for better air flow.

One of the more promising and developing technologies to combat sleep apnea is a device called Constant Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP), developed by an Australian researcher. It works by keeping the windpipe inflated, kind of like a vacuum-cleaning hose working in reverse.

"I'm going out on a limb by saying it works all the time," Price said.

Kathy Price said the problem many people have — and increasingly women past menopause — is the windpipe loses muscle tone and strength as people age and collapses inward more easily during sleep. She compares the air passageway in the throat to the hole in a tissue-paper roll without the cardboard tube for support. The

pressurized air from the CPAP keeps the passageway expanded, she said.

Denver Price said patients sometimes find the CPAP and other nonsurgical technologies initially uncomfortable, but long-term benefits are worth the effort. People just feel better, he said.

New CPAP technologies include systems that electronically monitor breathing patterns and match airflow to inhalation-exhalation cycles.

"We're getting more and more things to adjust the technologies," Price said.

Sleep disorders are rarely diagnosed properly among the very elderly. Medical professionals, Price said, often misdiagnose the decline in cognitive ability of some elderly patients as another inevitable fact of advancing age.

However, Price cites a recent study of nursing-home patients who were treated for sleep disorders. Sixty-five percent of the patients who were thought to be cognitively deficient improved considerably to the point where many were reading and performing other involved mental tasks, Price said.

Other options available to sufferers include surgically removing throat tissue or scaring the soft palette to reduce the vibration effect that causes snoring. These more invasive and risky approaches have about a 20-percent success rate, Price said.

A new realm of study in sleep disorders involves children. Price said pediatricians increasingly are sending children who had initially been diagnosed as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or attention deficit disorder to specialists to see if problems could stem from sleeping issues.

Price said some researchers have estimated nearly a third of children — especially boys — may suffer from some kind of sleep disorder or sleep deprivation that may affect school performance.

Those with undiagnosed sleep disorders who attempt to "sleep in" on weekends to "catch up" are only fooling themselves, Price said.

The sleep cycle doesn't work that way. People need a set amount of sleep per night and cannot refill the "sleep bank" later if they get behind. He suggests people establish a sleep schedule and stick to it, even on weekends.

Price said the ailments that bedevil many older men, such as enlarged hearts from high blood pressure or congestive heart failure, may be related to sleep patterns and disorders. He said it's unclear what causes which problem — the sleep disorder or the heart problem — but those who undergo treatment for a sleep disorder have improved.

The tests typically span two nights. The first is diagnostic, meaning patients are hooked to monitors that measure heart rates, brain waves, oxygen levels and muscle activity. The second night patients undergo the same monitoring — called a polysomnograph — but are fitted with a sleeping device to determine what level or

type of treatment will help.

Price said most insurers now recognize the benefits of the newly evolving field of sleep studies and provide treatment coverage in large part because of the high cost of treating stroke victims as opposed to sleep-disorder diagnosis. The cost for one night of treatment varies, Price said, but typically is about \$1,500.

Few free-standing sleep clinics exist in Central Florida. Advanced Sleep Diagnostics Center is the first in the area. Hospitals in Ocala and Leesburg have sleep clinics.

A side effect of getting treatment, Price said, is often a happier spouse.

With loud snoring eliminated, the partner no longer "wants to kill them."

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