

Too Fit for Sleep Apnea?

By Ashley Page, Off-Topic Media LLC

If you've seen an advertisement for snoring or sleep apnea treatment, it probably featured an overweight man or woman, snoring away in bed or even in front of a television. While many assume that sleep apnea is only diagnosed in patients who are overweight and obviously unhealthy, numerous studies and recent events have proved just the opposite. Even physically fit individuals can suffer from sleep apnea.

Understanding Sleep Apnea

What does a person who is one hundred pounds overweight have in common with someone who barely weighs one hundred pounds at all? The answer is an airway. Sleep apneics (people who suffer from sleep apnea) stop breathing several times, sometimes hundreds of times, every hour while they sleep, but they don't all stop breathing for the same reason. It's true that overweight individuals are at a higher risk of the disease due to fat deposits in the neck and throat that can compress and obstruct the airway, but there are other causes of sleep apnea. How can an NFL athlete or a marathon runner suffer from obstructive sleep apnea? In the case of a football player or a muscular Marine, the cause may be from the increase in muscle tissue in the neck, or because of an enlarged tongue. The pencil-thin marathoner may suffer from sleep apnea because her neck is so tiny that there's hardly any room for her airway. Or, the problem may be none of these things and may simply be due to misfiring brain signals. Believe it or not, even healthy children can suffer from the condition.

Many don't realize that sleep apnea comes in three forms: obstructive, central and complex. Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA), caused by a blockage of the airway, may be more common in people who are overweight due to excess fat pockets in the throat and neck area. However, obstruction can also be caused by a deviated septum, narrow nasal passages, narrow airways, and excessive soft throat tissues, such as enlarged tonsils, adenoids, or a larger than normal tongue – all problems that a fit person can suffer from.

Central sleep apnea is caused by a problem within the brain that causes the organ to slow, or even periodically stop breathing during sleep. This irregular breathing can cause blood oxygen levels to deplete. Complex sleep apnea is a combination of obstructive and central sleep apnea. Untreated obstructive sleep apnea can lead to problems with central sleep apnea, which then makes the apneic a complex sleep apnea sufferer. No matter which kind of sleep apnea a person has, the condition can lead to excessive sleepiness during the day, and in the long run can cause damage to internal organs such as the heart and brain.

According to Dr. Ken Siegel, a Philadelphia sleep apnea dentist, virtually anyone can suffer from sleep apnea. "People make the mistake of thinking that if they're not fifty to a hundred pounds overweight, that there's no way they have sleep apnea, and that's just not the case," comments Siegel. "Anyone with a mouth can have sleep apnea." Even the fittest people in today's society have been diagnosed with the condition, from former Oakland Raiders' number one draft pick, JaMarcus Russell, to thousands of active duty military men and women.

Knowing The Symptoms

Sleep apnea symptoms are not always obvious, which is why so many people unknowingly suffer from the disorder, sometimes for years before they are diagnosed. Unfortunately, while sufferers sleep, they can stop breathing hundreds of times each night without having any idea. That being said, there are signs people for which should look. The most common symptoms of sleep apnea include:

- Daytime drowsiness · Fatigue · A lack of energy · Loud snoring
- Cessations in breathing during the night
- Restlessness · Headaches upon waking

According to Dr. Siegel, snoring is the biggest indicator of obstructive sleep apnea. "Also, if a person's bed partner notices pauses in the person's breathing, that's a pretty good sign that there's apnea

