

A photograph of a man and a woman in a bed. The man is lying on his back, snoring with his mouth open. He is wearing a grey tank top and is covered by a yellow and black tiger-print blanket. The woman is sitting up on the right side of the bed, looking at the man with a concerned expression, her hand resting on her forehead. The bed has a leopard-print pillow and a gold-colored headboard. The background is dark and out of focus.

Sleep Disorders: Get Back to Sleep

What occurs in your body while you are asleep may have more serious implications for your daytime life and overall health than you ever thought. It's time to take another look at what's happening while you're sleeping.

Zzzzzz. Snoring. We all know the sound of it, the annoying, vibrating noise that sends many a bed partner to the couch. What many people are surprised to learn is that snoring may be a sign of a serious health issue. Let's explore for a minute the internal experience of an apnea patient. At first, he or she snores steadily, struggling to suck in air through a floppy upper airway. All the while oxygen level and blood pressure fall. Then, all of a sudden, the airway collapses, and his body sends a frantic message to the brain, "Wake up, or you're dead!" The body convulses, releasing pressure on the airway. "Puuh!" The sympathetic nervous system kicks in. Heart rate and blood pressure double in an instant. Blood flow is cut off from the organs and sent rapidly to the muscles. For a sleep apnea patient, this sequence can occur three or four hundred times a night. You think that's healthy?

Story by Megan Cohen
Photography by Martin Mann



Sleep-Disordered Breathing (SDB), an umbrella term encompassing a full spectrum of snoring and sleep apnea, can cause many serious health problems, including heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke, and depression. Unfortunately, the study of SDB is a fledgling field, and has only recently been included in medical school curriculum. Lack of knowledge often results in the direct treatment of these serious health problems without addressing the underlying cause. Yet for those in the medical world and the greater public who have been awakened by SDB, simple treatments can effectively change patients' lives.

What You Don't Know Could Hurt You

Sleep apnea refers to a complete blockage of the upper airway that causes you to stop breathing, temporarily. What happens in your body during a sleep apnea episode is a fright flight response—your nervous system's natural reaction to a threatening situation. I borrowed the preceding description of a sleep apnea event from Peter Farrell, Chairman, and CEO of ResMed Inc.; a San Diego-based company that researches, designs, and distributes CPAP (Continuous Positive Airway Pressure) machines worldwide for the treatment of SDB. Upon completing his description of this sequence, he added, "So that's why it causes hypertension, and in turn causes stroke and heart failure. Unless you treat it, you'll never be able to treat the heart failure or the stroke." Obesity is a common cause of the disorder, but it also affects non-obese men, pregnant and postmenopausal women, and even children.

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~Aliya Ferouz-Colborn, M.D.

A Wake-up Call for Jeff and Jer

Story by Roy Robertson
Photography by Martin Mann

In the world of morning radio shows, virtually no topic is untouchable. Routinely, morning show hosts share the most intimate details of their lives with their audience. Loyal listeners become extended family. Through the years on radio station Star 94.1, the Jeff & Jer Showgram talk has turned to their most personal moments. Even what happens in the bedroom is fair game; that is, unless the topic was, of all things, snoring. “We give up pretty much everything on the air, and we never talked about being snorers because we felt bad about it”, says Jeff Detrow. For a lot of guys, snoring is kind of a shameful thing.”

Early this year, though, the topic was raised, and the discussion was opened up to callers on their show. This led to what Jerry Cesak calls one of the most important issues they have talked about in 24 years of working together, not only for listeners, but for the hosts as well. “It was maybe one of the top five things we ever did on the radio in terms of response from listeners calling in.”

While describing their sleep patterns and problems, a doctor called into the show and concluded that they each might be suffering from sleep apnea. The suggestion startled Jeff. “I didn’t know there was such a thing,” he says. “I’d never heard of it.” He did know, as did his radio partner, that he had sleep-related issues. He chronically fell asleep in the most unusual places, and, as with everything else in their lives, they joked about it on the air. Jeff even fell asleep at Jerry’s bachelor party, and says sheepishly, “I’m probably the only guy who ever fell asleep at Pacers.” After years of snoring and feeling sleep deprived, Jerry considered he might be suffering from a sleep disorder. “After lunch, I was done. I’d be falling asleep on my desk every afternoon.”

At a visit to the UCSD Sleep Center, each was given a device to take home that monitors disturbances in sleep cycles, which can also diagnose sleep apnea. “It’s unobtrusive,” Jeff says. “You stick it on two fingers, and hook it up to the machine. You take it back to the doctor the next day and they tell you if you have it or not.”

The results of this simple test were, in a manner of speaking, a rude awakening. “I stopped breathing for up to 35 seconds at a time, and didn’t know it,” says Jerry. Of all the things the two have shared through the years, one of the most improbable commonalities was revealed to their listeners: both Jeff and Jerry were suffering from sleep apnea.



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Dr. Ferouz-Colborn demonstrates to the patient how the CPAP mask is worn while technician Edwin Diaz places scalp sensors in preparation for sleep testing (polysomnography)

Treating SDB can actually prevent cardiac disease and stroke and improve conditions like hypertension and depression. Unfortunately, it is difficult to diagnose. From a patient's perspective, identifying SDB is challenging because you are unaware that it is occurring. You may notice the symptoms of daytime sleepiness, atrial fibrillation, heart arrhythmia, frequent nighttime urination, reduced cognitive functioning and depression without recognizing the cause. As an ENT and sleep specialist, Dr. Aliya Ferouz-Colborn explains, "The problem is that people are not aware of what's happening to them while they're sleeping and unless they have somebody who's sharing their bed, who's astute and tells them, 'Hey, you know what? You stopped breathing,' then they're never going to know about it."

Compounding the problem, lack of education on sleep leaves most physicians in the dark when it comes to diagnosing SDB. "There's a lot of physician ignorance. Since we were never taught this in medical school, it's not something that's on our radar screens when we evaluate patients," says Dr. Ferouz-Colborn, who gives continuing education lectures on SDB nationwide. General physicians typically refer patients to a specialist to treat the associated ailment—hypertension, cardiac disease, diabetes, stroke, or depression—rather than the root cause.



Both were prescribed a mask to wear when they slept that opens up the air passages that routinely get blocked in sleep apnea patients. Jerry says, "The machine is about the size of a small shoe box," and it's very quiet." Jeff adds, "It's just like one of those little white noise wave machines."

Understanding the dangers of this affliction (see accompanying article by Megan Cohen), and now educated by specialists about effective options for treatment, they used their radio program as a vehicle to raise awareness among their listeners.

They feel there might be as much of a taboo on the topic as any other difficulty a couple might experience in the bedroom. Jerry initially rejected using the sleep mask he was prescribed, feeling as though it would be embarrassing to wear to bed. The initial reason for his embarrassment was his snoring, which disrupted his wife from getting a good night's sleep. The underlying cause of his snoring was sleep apnea. "It's not very attractive. I found it very embarrassing, but I thought it would be more embarrassing to wear this mask," he says. He now realizes his reluctance to use the mask may have endangered his health.

Jeff and Jerry are both sincerely concerned that other men may be similarly resistant to use the sleep apnea masks they now wear regularly, and someone's reticence may put their health at risk. Both say that there is a perception that the mask might compromise intimacy between a man and woman, and that could keep some men from seeking treatment. Jerry cautions, "There's a real stigma attached to this. People really need to give it up, because it's a truly miraculous life-changing technology."

"I think Jerry was probably worried about what a lot of guys worry about - coming between them and their wives," Jeff says. "They're afraid that it's going to make you seem less desirable, or that if you strap on a mask before you go to sleep, that it would get in the middle of the most intimate time of the day."

Initially, both had trouble acclimating to sleeping with the mask on, but say it doesn't take long to adapt. Jerry likens it to get used to wearing glasses. "I swear I don't even notice it anymore. I go to sleep with it and I wake up seven hours later. It's unbelievable!" Although they each use different types of masks, the technology is comparable.

The benefits are not only apparent to Jerry, but also for his wife, Pam. "For the first time in 15 years, my wife can get a good night's sleep, not laying next to this giant bison that's snoring all night and keeping her awake."





Peter Farrell, CEO
ResMed Inc.

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~Peter Farrell



Waking Up To Sleep

To Farrell’s satisfaction, awareness of SDB and its link to these serious health problems is spreading. Referencing his company’s tagline, he says earnestly, “The good news is that people are waking up to sleep.” One of the most encouraging indicators of the rise in awareness comes from within the medical specialties or silos as Farrell calls them. “Every one of those silos, they’re now starting to publish papers in

the literature on sleep-disordered breathing. And that, fundamentally, is an indicator of what’s happening. The equipment is getting better; it’s easier to use; and the awareness is coming hand in hand with improvements in technology,” Farrell explains.

ResMed now sells 330,000 CPAP machines monthly, another sign that news is catching on. The CPAP machine has a reverse vacuum effect; it blows compressed air into the nose to splint open a floppy airway and allows air to flow freely during sleep. The effectiveness of CPAP is tried and true, not only for remedying SDB, but also for improving the concurrent medical problems like heart disease and hypertension. As Dr. Ferouz-Colborn states, “We’ve shown that in studies of patients who undergo treatment for sleep apnea, say with CPAP, compared to those who don’t, the mean blood pressure decreases in a hypertensive patient without any additional medication.”

While CPAP machines and their masks have become smaller, it is still a treatment, not a cure. As Dr. Ferouz-Colborn relays, “Unfortunately, with CPAP, it’s not a fix, it’s just a treatment. It does not change your anatomy. Something else has to change your anatomy. Either you lose weight or you have surgery; those are more curative methods.” Sinus and nasal surgeries or oral devices fit by a dentist are other options depending on anatomy and severity of the disorder. In any case, patients must be continually monitored. “There’s a need for reassessment of patients who have sleep-disordered breathing since once you have it, you have a tendency to keep having it,” she explains.

The importance of identifying and treating sufferers of sleep-disordered breathing cannot be understated. “We know that in terms of productivity, health care utilization, prescriptions, and driving accidents that occur with patients who are tired, treating this one problem has huge ramifications,” Dr. Ferouz-Colborn states. Thousands of dollars in medical expenses can be saved by identifying a sleep apnea patient.

So, next time you hear someone snoring, make sure you let them know. You may be saving their life.



Aliya Ferouz-Colburn, M.D.