

Sleep Apnea: A Simpler Solution

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By Dr. Derek Conte

Joe is an overweight but athletic 50-year-old who has suffered from heavy snoring and sleep apnea for 12 years. He has a major problem with hip pain, has developed a limp, and is worried he will need a hip replacement before long. No matter how many hours of sleep he gets, he never feels rested upon waking.

Sleep apnea is a condition in which one stops breathing for seconds or even much longer while they sleep. Joe had not been dreaming in all of this time. Sleep apnea is a serious condition and very insidious because one is often not aware of it. There are Three types of sleep apnea: 1) Central sleep apnea, accounting for 1% of cases, is caused by faulty breathing signals from the brainstem and, 2) Obstructive sleep apnea, 85% of cases, where the back of the throat collapses, preventing the free flow air into the lungs and, 3) Mixed sleep apnea, 14% of cases. Apnea interrupts the sleep cycle many times each night and prevents the organs, including the brain, from getting enough oxygen. Apnea puts a strain on the heart and, in severe cases, can result in brain damage and even sudden death.

Joe has seen a chiropractor regularly and has gotten some relief from the hip pain. His X-Rays show minimal loss of joint space in the femoral joint and his orthopedist told him he shouldn't be having this degree of pain, as the joint is virtually normal, and suggested he take some natural anti-inflammatory supplements. Still, he had much pain and stiffness and the aching never seemed to stop. He tried stretching and this seemed to help some.

Joe's girlfriend contemplated sleeping in another room due to his snoring. She told him she was very frightened by his long episodes of not breathing and fitful sleep. She said it was like watching someone struggling in a fight all night. Joe was worried his snoring would drive his girlfriend away. Since he cared so much about her, he resolved to do something, even if it involved surgery to his throat. First he tried a nasal insert to open the nasal passage. This helped his breathing but did not stop the snoring or the apnea. Another non-surgical option was the C-PAP machine, but that was expensive and very uncomfortable to wear all night. Finally, he tried a mouthpiece that formed to his teeth and forced his lower jaw forward, opening the airway in the back of his throat. It cost him \$59 (NOTE: I have spoken to a specialist who fits people with a variety of sleep apnea devices. He indicated that these mouthpieces are indeed useful for people with "obstructive" sleep apnea. ***These mouthpieces are not appropriate for other types of apnea. A proper medical evaluation is essential for correct treatment***).

The morning after the very first night, Joe's girlfriend was still there. She told him he slept like a baby, undisturbed, and so quiet she thought he wasn't breathing at all; and he never missed a breath. After 2 weeks, Joe realized he was waking up feeling really rested for the first time in years. He also noticed that he was dreaming every night --- good dreams; vivid dreams. After another week he noticed there was much less pain in his hip, his muscles were looser and he wasn't limping nearly as much, and sometimes not at all. Is it possible that by quieting the apnea Joe was experiencing all four stages of sleep, including the levels during which growth and tissue repair take place - reducing his pain due to inflammation? I think so. Sleep apnea is a serious medical condition and should be evaluated properly, but it seems possible that a solution, for some, might not be so hard to come by.

Dr. Conte is co-founder of Chiropractic Specialists at 1154 Concord Rd. in Smyrna. Go to: drderekconte.com for more articles, photos, info and directions. Or call: 404-784-6008 for questions.