Sleep Apnea and Safety

Safety Talk

WHAT’S AT STAKE

Think back to the last time you came to work after a night spent tossing and turning – or with no sleep at all. Now imagine working that way day in and day out.

People with undiagnosed sleep apnea often work without benefit of refreshing sleep. They have a condition that causes them to stop breathing frequently through the night and each time they wake it is long enough to resume breathing, but never long enough to remember having woken.

They are exhausted the next day, but have no idea why; making the condition one that is difficult to diagnose.

WHAT’S THE DANGER

Researchers say as many as one-third of all workplace injury incidents and as many as 400,000 motor vehicle crashes yearly are caused by people who are sleep deprived as a result of conditions like sleep apnea.

Sleep apnea can cause excessive daytime sleepiness, memory lapses and difficulty concentrating and completing routine tasks. Workers may procrastinate, fall asleep while working and be impatient and irritable with co-workers.

EXAMPLE

A commercial truck driver involved in a crash that claimed the lives of two children and their mother says he “doesn’t know what happened.” Investigators suspect the man fell asleep at the wheel as a result of undetected sleep apnea.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Evaluate your risk
Anyone can have sleep apnea. However, men, smokers, people who are overweight or over 40 are the most susceptible. Tell your supervisor if you have sleep apnea.

Self monitor
Watch for signs of sleep apnea including excessive daytime sleepiness, morning headache and a sore throat or dry mouth upon waking. Listen if your spouse complains about your loud snoring or snoring followed by periods of silence or gasps for breath.

Stay fit
Lose weight and reduce or quit smoking altogether and you are less likely to suffer from sleep apnea.

See your doctor
Talk to your doctor immediately if you suspect sleep apnea or any sleep-related problem. Effective treatment is available.

Sleep on your side
You are more apt to snore and/or stop breathing while sleeping on your back, so avoid this position.

Avoid alcohol and sleeping pills
Sedatives relax the throat muscles and can interfere with breathing. Avoid them whenever possible.

Take fatigue seriously
People with sleep apnea are not “just a little tired.” They are impaired and often unable to work safely or identify dangerous behavior that may be obvious to others. Speak up if you notice unsafe behavior in co-workers.

FINAL WORD

Sleep apnea is a serious condition that, if left untreated, can have life-threatening consequences. Never underestimate the importance of sleep and the serious consequences of working under

the influence of too little sleep.