

Sleep problems

Sleep apnea can be fatal

Snoring may be an indication of a much more serious problem

By CAROL COHAN
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THE VILLAGES — If your sleeping partner nudges you to turn over during the night because of your snoring, if you wake up suddenly gasping for breath, or if you awake in the morning feeling tired, you may have sleep apnea, a condition caused when the airway collapses and prevents air from getting into the lungs.

Dr. Juan Albino, a pulmonary specialist who operates the breathing center and Village Sleep Lab in The Villages, presented a lecture on this and other sleep disorders on Tuesday at Savannah Center.

Albino has been in practice for more than 22 years. He received his medical education at Harvard Medical School and Harvard School of Public Health.

Sleep is necessary in order for you to function properly. During sleep, you rest and repair your body so you can make it through the day.

Sleep apnea is a serious, potentially life-threatening condition that is far more common than is generally understood. Obstructive sleep apnea occurs when air cannot flow into or out of the person's nose or mouth, although efforts to breathe continue.

An "apneic event" occurs if a person wakes up choking,

or gasping. These pauses in breathing almost always are accompanied by snoring between episodes. It must be noted that not all snorers have sleep apnea, Albino said.

Causes can be physical; that is, extra tissue in the back of the airway, such as large tonsils or a large uvula (that little flap of tissue hanging in the back of the throat); decrease in the muscle tone holding the airway open, or the tongue falling back and closing off the airway. Sleep apnea also can occur in obese people when an excess amount of tissue narrows the airway.

The consequences of sleep apnea range from annoying to life-threatening. A person may become depressed, irritable, have learning and memory difficulties, fall asleep on the job, or develop high blood pressure, which can bring on heart attacks or strokes. The interruptions of deep sleep often lead to early morning headaches and excessive daytime sleepiness.

It has been documented that some disasters are a result of sleep deprivation. For example, the Exxon Valdez, Chernobyl, and the Star Princess cruise ship grounding in Alaska all were a result of sleep deprivation. Ten percent of car and truck accidents are a result of sleep deprivation.

Albino stressed good sleep habits. Keep a regular schedule; that is, go to bed and get up at the same time each day. Use the bedroom only for sleeping; don't read or watch TV in bed. Avoid drugs like caffeine, alcohol, or tobacco before going to bed. Take only brief naps in the early afternoon; if you nap later you

might not be able to get to sleep when you go to bed.

Albino touched on other sleep disorders. One of the most common is insomnia, which is difficulty falling asleep, waking up frequently during the night and not being able to go back to sleep, waking up too early in the morning, and feeling tired and unrefreshed.

Most people need seven to eight hours of sleep a night, but individuals may vary in their need for sleep. Insomnia may cause problems during the day.

Causes of insomnia vary and can include advanced age, a history of depression, stress and worry, environmental noise, jet lag, medical conditions such as pain or heartburn, and taking certain drugs.

Albino also explained restless legs syndrome. If you have discomfort in your legs such as tingling, crawling or painful feelings, and an irresistible urge to move your legs, either when sitting or falling asleep, it may be restless leg syndrome.

Albino brought three of his patients to the lecture to speak to the audience about their experiences with sleep apnea and restless leg syndrome.

Dr. Alain Smolarski, a general practitioner, spoke as a "patient advocate." One of the reasons he sought help was because his wife told him his snoring kept her awake. After spending a night at the sleep center, which was "the best night's sleep I've had for a long time," he was diagnosed with sleep apnea and treated with a Continuous Positive Airway Pressure, or CPAP.

The device provides a gen-

tle flow of positive-pressure air through a nasal mask to splint the airway open during sleep, thus preventing the throat from closing. With the device, Smolarski sleeps through the night, doesn't wake up with cold sweats, and wakes up refreshed.

Another patient, Janet Jones, is starting a sleep apnea support group in The Villages. Her children and husband recorded her snoring one night, which convinced her to get help. She has used the CPAP for about four months and has never felt more refreshed or energetic. For more information about the support group, call 753-3773.

Villager June Wharton has restless leg syndrome and described herself as a "night walker." She informed the audience of a support group which meets in November, February and April in The Villages. For information, call 259-0979.

Albino's internship and residency was at Montefiore Hospital and Albert Einstein College of Medicine, New York. He had a fellowship in pulmonary/critical care at St. Luke's/Roosevelt Hospital, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, New York. He is board certified with the American Board of Internal Medicine and Pulmonary Medicine and Critical Care Medicine.

His office and the Village Sleep Center is Building 940, U.S. Highway 27/441 North, Suite 942. For additional information, call 751-4955.

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