

Recovery After Stroke: Sleep Disorders

Getting a good night's sleep is an important part of stroke recovery. And yet, sleep problems are common among stroke survivors. When these sleep problems go on for a long time, they are considered sleep disorders. Having a sleep disorder can be frustrating. It can make you tired and irritable. It can affect your health and quality of life. It can also pose serious dangers by increasing your risk for another stroke. The good news is that there are things you can do to get a good night's sleep again. Your sleepless nights are numbered.

Sleep Disorders Caused by Breathing Problems

About two-thirds (2/3) of stroke survivors have sleep-disordered breathing (SDB). This type of sleep disorder is caused by abnormal breathing patterns. With SDB, your sleep is interrupted several times throughout the night. So, during the day you may be really sleepy or have trouble thinking or solving problems. SDB also poses dangerous health risks because it can increase blood pressure, heart stress and blood clotting.

There are several types of SDB. The most common is obstructive sleep apnea (OSA). With OSA, you may stop breathing for 10 seconds or more, many times during the night. You usually won't have breathing problems during the day when you are awake.

Symptoms

There are several tell-tale signs that you have sleep-disordered breathing. Some are seen at night and others during the day.

Symptoms you might see at night include:

- ✓ loud snoring
- ✓ waking up frequently during the night, gasping for breath
- ✓ increased sweating
- ✓ shortness of breath
- ✓ insomnia, or being unable to fall asleep or remain asleep throughout the night

Sleeping problems at night can cause problems the next day, including:

- ✓ excessive daytime sleepiness
- ✓ memory or attention problems
- ✓ headaches
- ✓ fatigue (low energy level)
- ✓ irritability
- ✓ depression or extreme sadness

Diagnosing a Sleep Disorder

Most often, your bed partner is the first to notice the symptoms. Or you may notice them yourself. Either way, you should talk to your doctor if you think you may have a sleeping disorder. To officially diagnose the problem, your doctor may arrange a sleep test called a polysomnogram (PSG). This painless, all-night test will study your sleep patterns. It is typically done in a special sleep center.

Treating Your Sleep Disorder

Treatments vary, depending on whether your case is mild or more serious.

- You may be able to improve mild cases by losing weight, staying away from alcohol and avoiding sleep medicines.
- For mild to moderate cases, your doctor may prescribe a special dental appliance. Worn at night while you sleep (like a retainer), this tool can open up your airways and improve your breathing.
- In some cases, the problem is caused by your sleeping position and can be treated by keeping you from turning onto your back at night. This can be done by sewing an object such as a tennis ball to your pajamas, making it uncomfortable for you to turn over.
- The most successful treatment is usually continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP), a form of breathing assistance during sleep. CPAP uses air pressure to open up your airways. The CPAP machine is a little larger than an average toaster. It blows heated, humidified air through a short tube to a mask that you wear. The mask must fit snugly to prevent air from leaking. The CPAP machine is portable and can be taken on trips. People using CPAP report having higher energy levels, better thinking abilities, and improved well being during the day. They also say they are less sleepy.
- Severe cases may require surgery.

Other Sleep Disorders

There are a few other sleep disorders commonly seen in stroke survivors.

- About 20-40% of survivors have “circadian disturbances” or sleep-wake cycle disorders (SWDs). With this sleep problem, your sleep schedule is no longer determined by day and night. Bright light therapy may help you get your sleep-wake schedule back on track.
- Another frequent sleeping problem after stroke is insomnia, or trouble falling asleep or staying asleep throughout the night. Treating this often-complex problem may involve behavioral or medical intervention.

Professionals Who Can Help

- ✓ A doctor or sleep medicine specialist
- ✓ Health psychologist or behavioral sleep medicine specialist
- ✓ Certified sleep center

Rehabilitation is a lifetime commitment and an important part of recovering from a stroke. Through rehabilitation, you relearn basic skills such as talking, eating, dressing and walking. Rehabilitation can also improve your strength, flexibility and endurance. The goal is to regain as much independence as possible.

Remember to ask your doctor, “Where am I on my stroke recovery journey?”

Note: This fact sheet is compiled from general, publicly available information and should not be considered recommended treatment for any particular individual. Stroke survivors should consult their doctors about any personal medical concerns.