



# Understanding Sleep Disorders



Bob, diagnosed in 2005.



## What Are Sleep Disorders?

Many sleep disorders are brain disorders that cause interruptions in sleep patterns. They prevent people from getting enough sleep. Most people require 7 to 10 hours of sleep per day. The brain regulates sleep and is the only organ known to require or benefit from sleep. Not getting enough sleep can affect quality of life. Untreated sleep disorders can also cause serious safety problems and medical issues.

Most sleep problems fall into one of these categories:

- **Circadian rhythm disturbances:** Sleep/wake patterns that do not follow a normal 24-hour rhythm
- **Hypersomnia:** Excessive sleepiness
- **Insomnia:** Difficulty getting to and staying asleep
- **Narcolepsy:** Usually includes sudden onset of sleep, sudden loss of muscle tone, and hallucinations when falling asleep or waking up
- **Sleep apnea:** Stopping breathing while sleeping
- **Restless legs syndrome:** Feelings of restlessness and abnormal sensations in the legs that typically occur in the evening when lying down and are improved by movement
- **REM sleep behavior disorder:** Involves acting out dreams during sleep, which can cause self-injury or injury to the bed partner
- **Parasomnias:** Sleepwalking and sleep terrors

More than 100 sleep disorders affect millions of Americans. Most can be treated or prevented. Yet many people never seek help. The first step is to talk to your physician about your symptoms. Restful sleep is important for your physical and mental health.

## **What Causes Sleep Disorders?**

Sleep disorders have a wide range of causes, including medical and psychological conditions. Some sleep disorders are caused by restriction of the upper airway while sleeping. Others are caused by genetic conditions.

Other factors that affect sleep are age, medications, diet, and environmental factors, such as shift work.

## **What Types of Symptoms Are Related to Sleep Disorders?**

Symptoms vary by sleep disorder. Most sleep disorders include one or more of the following symptoms:

- Fatigue
- Inability to fall asleep at night
- Inability to stay asleep at night
- Excessive daytime sleepiness
- Loud snoring or gasping sounds during sleep
- Sleep attacks, or unintended episodes of falling asleep
- Loss of muscle control or inability to move
- Unusual behaviors such as sleepwalking or sleep terrors

You should discuss any sleep-related symptoms with your neurologist or primary care physician; sometimes symptoms are caused by another medical condition.

### **Did you know?**

Neurologists are medical doctors who specialize in disorders of the brain and nerves. They are the specialists who often diagnose and treat sleep disorders.

## **How Are Sleep Disorders Diagnosed?**

A neurologist who specializes in sleep disorders can diagnose and help you manage your sleep disorder. In order to diagnose your disorder, your neurologist will evaluate your symptoms. The evaluation starts with a visit to a sleep clinic. The staff will ask you about your sleep history and perform diagnostic tests. Sometimes a test for daytime sleepiness is done.

You may be asked to keep a diary of your sleeping habits to record patterns not recognized by you or your physician.

You may also need an overnight sleep study to determine the quality of your sleep by measuring body functions as you sleep. These include heart rate, electrical activity of the heart, breathing, snoring, brain activity, eye movements, body movements, and oxygen level. Tests may involve applying sensors to your body that are easily removed the next morning. You may also be videotaped so your physician can see your sleep problem firsthand.

## **How Are Sleep Disorders Treated?**

Once the tests are done, your neurologist will discuss the results with you and make a treatment plan. Most sleep problems are treatable. A variety of treatment options may be available, depending on your specific sleep disorder, such as:

- Better sleep habits
- Avoidance of alcohol and tobacco
- Exercise in the early part of the day
- Medication, if appropriate
- Surgical treatment
- Use of a machine at night to prevent your airway from closing

## **Living with Sleep Disorders**

Most sleep disorders are treatable or preventable. You don't need to lose even more sleep over these disorders. Discuss the options with your physician.

### **Overall Good Sleep Practices**

Good sleep practices may help you improve your sleep in general. They may also help with some sleep disorders. Make an effort to:

- Keep a regular sleep schedule
- Sleep only in the bedroom
- Avoid napping
- Limit caffeine, alcohol, and cigarettes
- Avoid large meals before bedtime
- Exercise on a regular basis, but avoid strenuous exercise before bedtime
- Make your bedroom comfortable with low light and noise levels
- Turn off the television if you have one in your bedroom
- Establish a bedtime ritual to signal to your body that it is sleep time
- Consider relaxation techniques to reduce stress levels
- Keep a sleep/wake diary to record your sleeping patterns

Sleep disorders can affect your relationships, especially with your spouse. Be sure to talk with your spouse about your disorder and the treatments your neurologist has prescribed.

### **Partnering with Your Neurologist**

To provide the best care, your neurologist needs to know all about your symptoms and medical history. Likewise, you need to get answers to your questions. Keeping a notebook about your condition and bringing a few well-organized questions along with your sleep diary to your appointments can be helpful.

## **Help Us Cure Brain Disease**

### **Make a Donation to Research**

The American Brain Foundation supports vital research and education to discover causes, improved treatments, and cures for brain and other nervous system diseases. To learn more or to make a donation to support research, visit [www.CureBrainDisease.org](http://www.CureBrainDisease.org).

### **Make Your Voice Heard**

To keep research advancing toward future cures and treatments for brain disease, it is important for people affected by neurologic disorders to advocate for more research funding. Contact your members of Congress and ask them to support neurology research by increasing funding for the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Look up your Congressional representatives at [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov) and [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov). Your voice can make a difference.

### **Take Part in Research**

People are needed for clinical trials that can help find new treatments for neurologic disorders. Clinical trials are research studies. They help ensure that new drugs are both safe and effective. Ask your neurologist how to volunteer for a clinical trial. You can also find trials through patient organizations or the American Academy of Neurology website at [www.aan.com/view/clinicaltrials](http://www.aan.com/view/clinicaltrials).

## **Resources**

### **American Academy of Neurology**

*www.aan.com*

**(800) 879-1960**

The American Academy of Neurology website for patients and caregivers offers a wealth of articles, information about events and resources, and links to support groups, clinical trial information, and more.

### **Neurology Now® magazine**

*www.neurologynow.com*

**(800) 879-1960**

Free magazine for patients and caregivers, courtesy of the American Academy of Neurology. Stories about people living with neurologic disorders, the latest information on resources and treatments, and more.

### **American Sleep Apnea Association**

*www.sleepapnea.org*

**(888) 293-3650**

### **National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke**

*www.ninds.nih.gov*

**(800) 352-9424**

### **National Sleep Foundation**

*www.sleepfoundation.org*

**(703) 243-1697**

### **Narcolepsy Network**

*www.narcolepsynetwork.org*

**(888) 292-6522**

### **Restless Legs Syndrome Foundation**

*www.rls.org*

**(507) 287-6465**



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The American Academy of Neurology, an association of 25,000 neurologists and neuroscience professionals, is dedicated to promoting the highest quality patient-centered neurologic care. For more information about the American Academy of Neurology, visit *www.aan.com*.