Obstructive Sleep Apnea and Spinal Cord Injury

Obstructive Sleep Apnea (OSA) is a disease in which people stop breathing while they’re asleep. OSA has long been known to cause memory loss, mood changes, and daytime fatigue, and for this reason has traditionally been considered a lifestyle concern. More recently, though, OSA has been linked with diabetes (1), unfavorable cholesterol levels (2), stroke (3), high blood pressure (4), and low testosterone levels in men (5), and due to these important health risks, OSA has received increasing attention from researchers and doctors.

A study from 2002 suggested that around 5% of American adults have OSA (6)—although most experts in the field believe the number is higher than that—yet no one is sure what percent of people with SCI have the condition. Women and people with paraplegia haven’t been studied as often as men or those with tetraplegia, so we don’t have an accurate understanding of how this disease affects all people with SCI. Some researchers believe that only 9% of people with SCI have OSA (7), but most believe the true estimate is between 30 and 50% (8,9).

One of the most concerning aspects of OSA is its link with heart disease. Recent studies have shown that people with untreated OSA have higher risk of heart failure, heart attack, and stroke than those without OSA (3,10,11). This being said, a 2005 study demonstrated that people with severe OSA who are properly treated for the condition—usually by wearing a breathing mask at night—have a dramatically lower risk of suffering or dying from a stroke or a heart attack than those who are untreated (12).

Not everyone with OSA has classic symptoms, so it is appropriate for all people with SCI to ask their doctors if they should be screened for it. Testing involves overnight monitoring, either in a dedicated facility or in one’s own home, and it is relatively easy to arrange.

References:


Source: Excerpted from “Health Considerations in Spinal Cord Injury: A Handbook for People with SCI” with permission from Michael D. Stillman, M.D., Assistant Professor of Internal Medicine and Neurosurgery, University of Louisville School of Medicine.
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