How to Deal With COPD and Sleep Apnea

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Understanding COPD and Sleep Apnea

Among its other symptoms, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) often causes sleep problems as well. Patients with COPD often have insomnia that can contribute to chronic fatigue and daytime sleepiness. Medications that treat COPD can also affect the quality of sleep.

Sleep apnea is a chronic medical condition where the affected person repeatedly stops or nearly stops breathing during sleep. These episodes last 10 seconds or more and cause oxygen levels in the blood to drop, leading to potentially serious health consequences.

Sleep apnea is usually caused by an obstruction of the upper airway, resulting in obstructive sleep apnea. However, it may also be caused also by a failure of the brain to initiate a breath, called central sleep apnea.

Symptoms of Sleep Apnea

If you have sleep apnea, you will experience loud snoring and/or abnormal patterns of snoring with pauses and gaps. This is when you cease breathing for short periods of time.

Other symptoms you may have include:

- Excessive daytime sleepiness
- Irritability
- Depression
- Memory changes
- Erectile dysfunction

Treatment for Sleep Apnea

Available treatments for sleep apnea include:

- **Continuous nasal airway pressure devices (CPAP**) – This is a mask is worn over the nose during sleep. It gently forces compressed air through the nose to keep the patient’s airway open.
- **Oxygen therapy –** At night, oxygen therapy can be used to keep oxygen levels within normal limits.
- **Medications –** Medications such as non-benzodiazepines can help insomnia and OSA. Benzodiazepines need to be avoided since it may compromise effective air exchange. Newer meds like Ambien are safer alternatives in patients with less severe COPD.
- **Oral Appliances –** This type of approach involves placing an appliance that will improve breathing by placing the jaw in a better position. It holds the tongue in place or it will push the lower jaw forward while the patient is asleep to facilitate better airflow and volume.

- **Exercise –** Exercise may seem an unlikely intervention, but people with chronic lung disease often show significant improvement in sleep quality after making exercise a part of their daily routine. It doesn't have to be anything strenuous; you may want to try walking each day and see if it helps you get a more restful sleep.
- **UPPP surgery –** Uvulopalatopharngyoplasty (UPPP) surgery corrects obstructions in the airways. It removes tissue like the uvula (the part that hangs in the back of the mouth), the soft palate (the back portion of the top of the mouth), and the pharynx. Sometimes the tonsils and adenoids may be removed as well. However, this surgery is often not successful.

If you are experiencing daytime sleepiness, snoring, insomnia, or pauses in your sleep, you should see a specialist. The treatment of these sleep disturbances may provide significant long-term benefits for you.