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Friday Safety Brief®

Sleep Apnea

(What it is and the problem it produces in drivers)



Sleeping disorders and accidents blamed on them have been the subject of many meetings held by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration and associated groups, law suits, the Medical Review Board and others. Plaintiff attorneys have held that motor carriers “should have known” or “should have seen the signs” when a driver had a sleeping disorder and drove while drowsy. Studies reveal that many people have these types of sleeping disorders, but unless you have all of your drivers tested, it will probably be difficult to detect until post-accident investigation brings it to light, IF it does. If a driver is obviously drowsy and someone in your company notices, you would surely relieve that driver from duty until he/she is fully rested. But all too often, the driver is on the road and there is no way to know.

We checked online to see what sleep apnea really consists of. Here is what we found:

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia —

apnea is a [sleep disorder](#) characterized by abnormal pauses in [breathing](#) or instances of abnormally low breathing, during [sleep](#). Each pause in breathing, called an [apnea](#), can last from a few seconds to minutes, and may occur 5 to 30 times or more an hour. There are three forms of sleep apnea: [central](#) (CSA), [obstructive](#) (OSA), and complex or mixed sleep apnea (i.e., a combination of central and obstructive) constituting 0.4%, 84% and 15% of cases respectively In CSA, breathing is interrupted by a lack of respiratory effort; in OSA, breathing is interrupted by a physical block to airflow despite respiratory effort and [snoring](#) is common.

Regardless of type, an individual with sleep apnea is rarely aware of having difficulty breathing, even upon awakening. Symptoms may be present for years (or even decades) without identification, during which time the sufferer may become conditioned to the daytime sleepiness and [fatigue](#) associated with significant levels of sleep disturbance.

Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) is the most common category of sleep-disordered breathing. The muscle tone of the body ordinarily relaxes during sleep, and at the level of the throat the human airway is composed of collapsible walls of soft tissue which can obstruct breathing during sleep. Mild occasional sleep apnea, such as many people experience during an [upper respiratory infection](#), may not be important, but chronic severe obstructive sleep apnea requires treatment to prevent low blood oxygen ([hypoxemia](#)), [sleep deprivation](#), and other complications.

The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration has been meeting with medical groups and others, in an effort to develop some type of guidelines on the subject and to make certain that physicians who perform the required driver physical examinations are fully informed of the regulations concerning medical qualifications for drivers. Until any new rules or other guidelines come into the picture, motor carrier managers can take some steps that might avert an accident caused by a driver with a sleep disorder. Here are some suggestions; managers might consider an even more aggressive approach, as some carriers have done.



- Don't accept medical certifications — require a company medical exam for all new drivers.
- Use a physician who will agree to meet with you and who will become completely familiar with the Safety Regulations concerning medical qualifications for drivers. This physician should review and discuss with the driver all medical information given by the driver at the time of the exam.
- Make “Sleep Apnea” the topic of discussion at any safety meetings, training sessions, company newsletters, etc so that drivers are aware of the potential problem and know what signs to be aware of in order to detect any problems.
- Appoint a company committee to further research sleeping disorders and other medical conditions that can affect their safety (and others) while driving, and to develop more training and awareness programs within your company. (consider inviting your company physician to a safety meeting for a talk on the subject).
- Invite drivers' families to contribute to your effort. Your driver's wellbeing is their primary concern. ☸

