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Sleep Apnea: Mechanisms, Diagnosis and Evolving Interventions

Mandip Singh Bhangoo

Manmohit Singh

Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Abstract

Sleep apnea is a common disease but often overlooked one that is a form of sleep disordered breathing in which breathing stops periodically during the night while asleep. The periodic stopping causes hypoxemia and fragmented sleep. It results in serious daytime disability and increased risk of heart disease. This article examines the pathophysiology of the two main types, obstructive sleep apnea and central sleep apnea, along with current diagnostics and treatment options for the disease. This paper uses new epidemiological statistics and clinical trials to give an in-depth look at the global prevalence of the disease and new treatment methods such as hypoglossal nerve stimulation.

Keywords: Sleep Apnea, Obstructive Sleep Apnea, Central Sleep Apnea, Sleep-Disordered Breathing, Pathophysiology, Polysomnography, Apnea-Hypopnea Index, Cardiovascular Complications, Continuous Positive Airway Pressure, Hypoglossal Nerve Stimulation, Neuromodulation, Sleep Medicine

Introduction and Global Epidemiology

Sleep apnea is one of the most common sleep disorders characterized by periods when a person stops breathing or experiences dangerously shallow breathing during sleep. The actual prevalence of the problem has been seriously underestimated in the past decades. Current scientific studies give a much more accurate view of the extent of the disease. According to recent estimates, there are 936 million people aged between 30 and 69 years across the world who have obstructive sleep apnea at a mild or severe level, and 425 million individuals have moderate or severe forms of the disease (Benjafield et al., 2019).

There are two primary distinct pathophysiological types. The first is Obstructive Sleep Apnea (OSA), which is the most common form, occurring when the upper airway becomes physically occluded due to muscle relaxation. The second is Central Sleep Apnea (CSA), a less common neurological manifestation where the brain stem fails to transmit adequate signals to the respiratory control muscles. Risk factors for OSA are multifactorial. While obesity is a primary driver, advanced age, male sex, genetic predispositions toward a narrow airway architecture, smoking, and alcohol consumption all significantly elevate risk. Notably, OSA



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can manifest in nonobese individuals. This underscores that anatomical and neuromuscular variables are equally critical.

Causes and Pathophysiology

Sleep apnea physiology is based on its type but will have common effects on the entire body. In OSA, the muscles of the throat relax more than they should while sleeping. The relaxation causes the soft tissues of the airway, which include the soft palate, uvula, and the base of the tongue, to fall and block the throat. In this case, the air flow is blocked despite efforts by the individual to breathe. In CSA, the airway is totally clear, but the breathing drive is temporarily stopped.

In any case, this will cause periodic hypoxemia (lower blood oxygen saturation) and hypercapnia (increase in carbon dioxide). The brain detects the chemical imbalance and initiates micro-arousal. Micro-arousal is a short awakening that restores the tone of muscles and clears the airway by means of a sharp gasping or snoring. This process causes very bad sleep fragmentation and sympathetic activation. It causes the release of stress hormones which eventually damage the blood vessels.

Cardiovascular Complications

The link between sleep apnea and cardiovascular disease is profound and operates independently of other traditional risk factors like obesity. Acute cardiovascular stressors resulting from repetitive episodes of upper airway occlusion include hypoxemia, swings in intrathoracic pressure, and central nervous system arousals (Golbin et al., 2008). These acute stressors lead to long term homeostatic dysregulation.

Individuals suffering from OSA experience dysfunctions in the sympathetic nervous system and changes in heart rate variability during the daytime. Increased chemoreflex responses to hypoxemia lead to immediate peripheral vasoconstriction. In addition, the inspiratory effort against the obstruction in the upper airway leads to drastic reduction of intrathoracic pressures. These factors change transmural pressure, inhibit the filling of the left ventricle, and increase the myocardial oxygen consumption (Golbin et al., 2008). Therefore, OSA is highly likely to cause systemic hypertension, myocardial infarction, atrial fibrillation, and stroke.

Symptoms and Diagnosis

Sleep apnea is first noted usually through observation from the bedmate. The main clinical features are noisy and persistent snoring, witnessed episodes of apnea that are followed



by gagging and choking, drowsiness during daytime, and brain fog. They will also suffer from morning headaches due to hypercapnia and vasodilation at night, and dry mouth on waking up.

Polysomnography is the definitive diagnostic test used for the diagnosis of sleep apnea. Polysomnography tests are conducted during an overnight sleep study where there is monitoring of the brain waves, blood oxygen levels, heart rate, and breathing efforts. Severity is measured in terms of the Apnea-Hypopnea Index (AHI). This is a measure of the number of breathing interruptions that occur per hour of sleep. Normal AHI is below 5 per hour of sleep. Mild sleep apnea is 5-15 per hour. Moderate sleep apnea is 15-30 per hour. Severe sleep apnea is more than 30 per hour of sleep.

Standard Treatments and Interventions

Management of OSA is dependent on the degree of AHI and the anatomy involved. The continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) has proven to be the most effective form of non-surgical treatment for moderate and severe cases of OSA. CPAP involves using a device to produce a flow of pressurized air through the mask, thus creating a pneumatic splint to keep the airways open all night. Mandibular advancement devices can be employed to pull the mandible and tongue forward in mild cases.

Weight loss, alcohol abstinence, and positional treatment are crucial primary approaches for all patients. Lateral positioning of the patient while sleeping would help minimize gravitational force on the airway. Adherence to CPAP has proven challenging, prompting researchers to develop other medical devices.

Advanced Surgical Interventions and Neuromodulation

Where CPAP is not tolerated well, surgical options become necessary. These have included everything from procedures such as uvulopalatopharyngoplasty to maxillomandibular advancement. Recently, upper airway stimulation using a neurostimulator implanted device has been proven very effective.

This technique uses an implantable device that is sensitive to the efforts made for ventilation and stimulates the hypoglossal nerve through electrical signals. This process leads to forward movement of the tongue and keeps it from falling back and blocking the airways. In a multi-center, prospective cohort trial, upper airway stimulation led to a 68 percent reduction in the median value of AHI, with an average of 29.3 events per hour reduced to 9.0 events per hour (Strollo et al., 2014). Reduction in oxygen desaturation index and improvement in quality-



of-life measures were achieved with the treatment. It is an innovative approach that signifies a paradigm shift in the way we treat sleep apnea patients.

Conclusion

It is not only an ailment characterized by sleep disruption due to snoring but rather a systemic disease which can result in serious disturbances both of the cardiovascular system and metabolic processes. Early detection is of vital importance due to the fact that nowadays the number of patients with this disease exceeds one billion people. Increasing the efficacy of diagnostics is crucial today because of the rising incidence of the disorder. The development of various treatment options like hypoglossal nerve stimulation would definitely be necessary in the future.

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