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Sleep Apnea: An Unrecognized Hazard in the Workplace James L. Holly M.D.

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Your Life Your Health - The Examiner

Labor Day always causes us to think about the dignity of laboring for one's livelihood. It reminds us to be grateful to those -- our fathers and mothers, principally -- who worked hard to make our opportunities in life possible. And, as we think about them, we think about their well being.

SETMA is encouraging business to implement a worksite wellness program, encouraging employees to stop smoking, lose weight, exercise, eat right and to improve their health.

The benefits of a worksite wellness program can be seen simply by reviewing the incidence of a common disorder such as sleep apnea. Sleep Apnea has now been documented in up to a startling ten percent of adult men. For example, in unselected electrical technicians and in a general practice study, it has been noted in 27 to 47.8% of people with high blood pressure. Nearly 80% of distance truckers in one study showed repeated drops in oxygen levels during sleep, consistent with sleep apnea.

Sleep apnea is defined as repeated cessation of breathing in sleep, often with loud snoring and gasping, which occurs with greatest frequency in overweight individuals. Thus, one could reasonably anticipate that its prevalence will increase progressively as a result of the rapidly escalating prevalence of obesity in the U.S. While identified most often in men over age 40, sleep apnea also afflicts younger workers and women--particularly if obese or post menopausal. It is more likely in people with short, thick necks, nasal congestion and "sinus trouble", and it can be aggravated by alcohol and sleeping pills.

Sleep apnea has been associated:

With an up to 23-fold increased risk of heart attack

With an up to nine-fold increased risk of motor vehicle accidents
With a 2.7 fold increased risk of vascular deaths.

In 73.8% of male stroke victims.

With mortality rates in severe and mild untreated sleep apneics of 10.6% and 2.1%, respectively, versus 0% in treated sleep apneics.

In heart failure

In sleep related convulsions and in cardiac arrests

With irritability, mood swings, and difficulty with memory.

With impaired concentration, memory and problem solving ability in 89% of untreated sleep apneics.

Those at high risk for sleep disorders, which affect work productivity and

safety: Males over age 40

Shift

workers

Drivers

Overweight

employees Overtime

requirements

Equipment

operators.

Sleep disorders, including sleep apnea, are extremely treatable:

NARCOLEPSY is another treatable cause of excessive sleepiness and is at least as prevalent as multiple sclerosis. It usually begins earlier in life than sleep apnea, most frequently before age 30. Industrial injuries were reported in 18.9% of untreated or inadequately treated narcoleptics.

INSOMNIA, which afflicts over one-third of Americans, can impair alertness and functioning. Insomnia has been reported to cause a 2.5-fold increased risk of motor vehicle accidents: a risk that may be compounded by inappropriate self-treatment with alcohol or sleeping pills.

NIGHT/ROTATING SHIFT WORK SCHEDULES have been associated with a wide range of problems that increase employer health expenditures, including:

Ulcers, gastritis and other gastrointestinal problems, Respiratory problems and increased respiratory infections, Low back pain, Headaches, Heart disease, Emotional/marital difficulties, Susceptibility to stress, Increased smoking and alcohol use, Memory lapses and An overall decline in health.

As recently as 12/11/95, a study of over 121,000 female nurses reported that those working irregular shifts for over six years were up to 70% more likely to suffer heart attacks. This finding was similar to a 1986 study that showed an 80% increased risk of cardiovascular disease in male paper mill workers on shift work when compared to those on day shifts.

The U.S. Department of Transportation reports:

Estimated that up to 200,000 motor vehicle accidents per year may be sleep-related.

One of every five drivers admits to having fallen asleep at least once behind the wheel, and 69% of motorists report drowsiness while driving.

The U.S. National Transportation Safety Board found that nearly one-third of all fatal-to-driver traffic accidents had sleepiness as their probable cause. The NTSB investigated 107 single- vehicle accidents in which the driver survived and discovered that 58% were related to

fatigue-- with 18% of the drivers admitting they had fallen completely asleep. The drivers in this sample had obtained only 5.5 hours of sleep during their preceding sleep periods: 2.5 hours less than the average reported by truckers with non-fatigue related accidents.

Sleepy workers are dangerous, less productive, and a major source of increased health care costs and corporate liability. Studies of the workplace and transportation industries reveal that human error causes up to 90% of accidents, with inadequate sleep representing a major factor in human error.

If your organization is at risk, it's worth knowing about it, because the problem is serious, and because you can do something about it. And, a simple questionnaire can help you determine how many of your employees are experiencing a sleep disorder.

If, as an employee, you are experiencing sleepiness on the job, ask for help.

Remember, it is your life and it is your health.