"I think I may have sleep apnea. Is it dangerous?"

Sleep apnea is a common disorder in which you have one or more pauses in breathing or experience shallow breaths while you sleep.

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Breathing pauses can last from a few seconds to minutes and can occur 30 times or more an hour. Typically, normal breathing then starts again, sometimes with a loud snort or choking sound. Often when experiencing sleep apnea, you move out of deep sleep and into light sleep. As a result, the quality of your sleep is poor. Sleep apnea often goes undiagnosed, and usually a family member is the first to notice the signs.

The most common type of sleep apnea is obstructive sleep apnea.

With this condition, the airway collapses or becomes blocked during sleep. This causes shallow breathing or breathing pauses. When you try to breathe, any air that squeezes past the blockage can cause loud snoring. Obstructive sleep apnea is more common in people who are overweight, but it can affect anyone, especially small children who have enlarged tonsil tissue blocking their airways.

Sleep apnea is not a condition to take lightly.

According to the National Sleep Foundation, "The connection between sleep apnea and heart disease is evolving very rapidly. People with cardiovascular problems such as high blood pressure, heart failure and stroke have a high prevalence of sleep apnea. Whether sleep apnea actually causes heart disease is still unclear, but we do know that if you have sleep apnea today, the chance that you will develop hypertension in the future increases significantly."

How is it diagnosed?

Your primary care provider (PCP) may suggest a sleep study. Sleep studies reveal how often you stop breathing or have too little air flowing into your lungs. They also find out how much oxygen you have in your blood during sleep. There are two types of studies: in-home sleep testing and testing at a sleep facility. Your PCP can discuss which one would be appropriate for you. Fallon Health has partnered with Sleep Management Solutions (SMS) to provide sleep diagnostic and therapy management services for selected Fallon products. Please visit fallonhealth.org to find out more information regarding sleep studies.

How is it treated?

Once you have been diagnosed with sleep apnea, your PCP will discuss treatment options. You may be able to treat mild sleep apnea by making changes in how you live and the way you sleep. For example:

- Lose weight if you are overweight.
- Sleep on your side and not your back.
- Avoid alcohol and medicines, such as sedatives, before bed.
- If lifestyle changes don't help, you may be able to use a machine that helps you breathe while you sleep. This unit is called a continuous positive airway pressure machine, also known as a CPAP.
- If your airway is blocked, your doctor may suggest surgery.

If you suspect you may be experiencing sleep apnea, please talk with your PCP.
We hope you sleep well.

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13-605-003 Rev. 02 4/17