

# Staying Awake Means Staying Alive

## What is sleep apnea?

Sleep apnea is a sleep-related breathing disorder which makes sufferers repeatedly stop breathing. This causes fatigue, irritability and daytime drowsiness. Untreated sleep apnea progressively worsens with age, carrying major health and safety risks. But proper treatment greatly reduces this risk and can markedly improve well-being.

The results of a recent study revealed that 17.6 percent of commercial truck drivers have mild sleep apnea, 5.8 percent have moderate sleep apnea, and 4.7 percent have severe sleep apnea. There is a 2-7 times increased accident rate with untreated Obstructive sleep apnea.

## What are the symptoms?

Most people remain unaware of these breathing pauses in their sleep. They claim they “sleep like a log”. Even so, these pauses cause mini-awakenings that result in shallow, restless, non-refreshing sleep. The brain becomes deprived of the rest it needs to remain healthy. Over time, this sleep disturbance leads to excessive daytime sleepiness and can cause:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Deterioration of memory
- Personality changes
- Depression
- High blood pressure
- Heart disease
- Sexual difficulties and impotence

## What are the health risks?

Sleep apnea can rob your health in multiple serious ways, leading to illnesses including:

- Hypertension
- Stroke; including loss of limb movement, vision, or speech
- Heart attack
- Cardiac arrhythmia- disrupted heartbeat
- Heart failure-loss of the heart's ability to pump blood sufficiently

## Diagnosis

An office visit with your primary care physician or pulmonologist, who will examine your mouth and throat, can assess your risk of sleep apnea. A combination of risk factors, including body mass index (a measurement of height and weight), neck circumference and blood pressure also helps identify people at risk. Confirming suspected sleep apnea requires a polysomnogram/sleep study, the “gold standard” test.

## What about treatment?

First-line treatment for commercial drivers with OSA includes Positive Airway Pressure (PAP) devices, such as CPAP or Bi-PAP. Other simple initial steps may include learning to sleep in a particular position (usually off the back), quitting smoking and especially losing weight. A 10-15 percent weight reduction will cut sleep apnea severity by 50 percent. That may result in resolution of condition and the need to utilize PAP.

To better understand sleep apnea, refer to [www.sleepeducation.com](http://www.sleepeducation.com)



## Commercial drivers and sleep apnea

With proper treatment, drivers who have sleep apnea can remain on the job. But untreated sleep apnea requires drivers to remain off-duty. Worse yet, undetected sleep apnea poses an ongoing risk as drivers continue to work unaware of the condition. Driving while unable to adequately concentrate or maintain wakefulness increases the crash risk. Sleep apnea causes 100,000 motor vehicle crashes annually.

PAP appliances include small, portable models that easily operate in the sleeping quarters of most trucks. All commercial drivers on PAP must use a machine which can measure time on pressure. Most modern devices have memory chips which do this automatically.

A minimum acceptable average use of CPAP is 4 hours within a 24 hour period; however longer use of treatment adds more benefit, especially for professional drivers. They must use the device at least 70% of nights.