Sleep Disorders

Pre-reading

Questions: What are sleep disorders? Who has them? What do you know about them?
Definitions: Chronic – lasting a long time
Insomnia – the condition of being unable to fall asleep

Reading

At least 40 million Americans suffer from chronic sleep disorders each year. Two of the most
common are insomnia and sleep apnea.

Many people experience short-term insomnia. This problem can result from stress, jet lag, diet, or
many other factors. Insomnia almost always affects job or school performance. Insomnia tends to increase
with age. It affects about 40 percent of women and 30 percent of men.

For short-term insomnia, doctors may prescribe sleeping pills. Mild insomnia can often be
prevented or cured by practicing good sleep habits. One “good sleep” tip is going to bed at the same time
each night and getting up at the same time each morning. Another is relaxing with a warm bath or good
book before bed.

An estimated 18 million Americans have sleep apnea. However, few of them have had the problem
diagnosed. Sleep apnea is a disorder of interrupted breathing during sleep. It usually occurs in association
with fat buildup or loss of muscle tone with aging.

These changes allow the windpipe to collapse during breathing when muscles relax during sleep.
This problem is called obstructive sleep apnea. It is usually associated with loud snoring, though not
everyone who snores has this disorder. Sleep apnea can also occur if the neurons that control breathing
malfucion during sleep.

During an episode of obstructive apnea, the person’s effort to inhale air creates suction that
collapses the windpipe. This blocks the air flow for 10 seconds to a minute while the sleeping person
struggles to breathe.

When the person’s blood oxygen level falls, the brain responds by awakening the person enough to
tighten the upper airway muscles and open the windpipe. The person may snort or gasp, and then resume
snoring. This cycle may be repeated hundreds of times a night.

The frequent awakenings that sleep apnea patients experience leave them continually sleepy. Sleep
apnea also deprives the person of oxygen, which can lead to morning headaches or a decline in mental
functioning. It is also linked to high blood pressure and an increased risk of heart attacks and stroke.

Many treatments are available for sleep apnea. Mild sleep apnea can often be overcome through
weight loss or by preventing the person from sleeping on his or her back. Other people may need special
devices or surgery to correct the problem. People with sleep apnea should never take sleeping pills as they
may prevent a person from awakening enough to breathe.

Source: National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, Sleep Disorders
Understanding

1. What are some of the effects of sleep disorders?

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2. What is sleep apnea? Why does it happen?

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3. Who is more likely to have sleep apnea? Why?

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4. What does the word **mild** mean?

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5. What are some causes of insomnia?

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6. How common is it?

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7. Who may be able to take sleeping pills and who shouldn’t? Why?

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Writing

**Option A:** Summarize the reading in your own words.

**Option B:** How do you sleep? Describe a typical night’s sleep. What concerns do you have about your sleep?

**Option C:** Do you or someone you know have a sleeping disorder? How is it managed?

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