

Sleep Disorders: Not Just Phantoms of the Night

[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC — safer, healthier people.

[Susan Laird] Welcome to this CDC podcast on sleep problems. I'm your host, Susan Laird.

Most of us aren't surprised to hear that a CDC study of metropolitan, urban, and rural Georgia populations found that many people have problems staying awake during the day. The study also reported that a lot of people have trouble falling asleep and staying asleep through the night, and that they may wake up feeling unrefreshed. These complaints may signal a treatable sleep disorder or simply reflect not getting enough sleep. Either can cause serious health problems.

Dr. Michael Decker is principal investigator of CDC's chronic fatigue syndrome Translational Research Program. His recent study on daytime sleepiness is the subject of our talk today. We're also joined by Dr. William Reeves, chief of the Chronic Viral Diseases Branch. They're here to discuss the impact of these problems with sleep.

[Susan Laird] Dr. Reeves, tell us about the study. Where did you conduct it and how many people participated?

[Dr. Reeves] We conducted the study in Georgia. We wanted to look at normal adults in a big city population, so we looked at Atlanta, normal adults in a large city, so we looked at Macon, Georgia, and normal adults living in the countryside around Macon. We talked to about 7,000 adults on the telephone, and this was part of a study of chronic fatigue syndrome, which I will usually call CFS. We're studying CFS because our information shows that about three percent of adults in the United States suffer the illness. Because many of the symptoms of CFS are similar to those of sleep disorders and because many people with CFS do have sleep disorders, we included a variety of questions to check out sleep.

[Susan Laird] And what did you find?

[Dr. Reeves] What we found is that a large proportion of people we talked to had a sleep disorder that we didn't know that they had: either not getting enough sleep, or something like snoring which we call sleep apnea. Because the studies were done in normal Georgian people, we believe that the findings should be able to be extended to the rest of the country, but obviously studies would be needed to make sure that's true.

[Susan Laird] And what did these study participants say about their sleep patterns, Dr. Decker?

[Dr. Decker] We found that sixteen percent of residents in Georgia reported continual problems staying awake during the daytime.

We also found that, in addition to problems staying awake, three out of ten Georgians reported that they snore, one out of four complain they have problems falling asleep, and a third couldn't sleep through the night. We also found that a third awoke in the morning feeling unrefreshed. So,

in spite of all these sleep problems, only 10 percent of the people in our study reported having been diagnosed with a sleep disorder.

[Susan Laird] This sounds like a big problem, and yet it goes undiagnosed so much of the time. What are the signs of a sleep disorder?

[Dr. Decker] There are many signs of sleep disorders. Daytime sleepiness is one of the primary signs and it's dangerous in its own right. Daytime sleepiness may reflect not getting enough sleep at night or having an irregular sleep schedule from something like shift work. And there are other very serious sleep disorders, such as sleep apnea or insomnia, and these also cause daytime sleepiness, and all of these disorders can be treated.

[Susan Laird] Dr. Reeves, how serious a problem is it if a sleep disorder isn't diagnosed?

[Dr. Reeves] Well, everybody understands that your quality of life is terrible when you're sleepy. You just feel sleepy. Excessive daytime sleepiness greatly increases the risk of accidents on the highway, accidents at work, and just not doing well at work. Insufficient sleep and primary sleep disorders like sleep apnea are also associated with very serious medical diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke. And, as Dr. Decker noted, only a small number of people with these problems are actually diagnosed.

[Susan Laird] So how does a person know when they need to seek help?

[Dr. Decker] It's not normal to always feel sleepy or fatigued during the daytime. If this is happening, tell your doctor, and provide as much supporting information as possible.

For example, if you wake up feeling unrefreshed - ask your bed partner whether you snore or whether you kick during the night. Your doctor also needs to know if you wake up with a dry mouth, or if you experience morning headaches, or if you have tingling in your arms or legs during the evening. These are all subtle signs of sleep disorders.

And the best place to get help is through an accredited sleep disorder center or a board-certified doctor. These are people and centers who can recognize your symptoms, perform the right diagnostic tests, and provide the appropriate treatment.

[Susan Laird] Where can listeners get more information about your study in particular and chronic fatigue syndrome in general?

[Dr. Reeves] CDC's chronic fatigue syndrome website address is www.cdc.gov/cfs.

[Susan Laird] Thanks, Dr. Reeves and Dr. Decker. I've been talking today with Dr. William Reeves and Dr. Michael Decker from CDC's Chronic Viral Diseases Branch about the long term health issues that may come from undiagnosed sleep problems.

Remember that having problems staying awake during the day is a sign to get help. Talk to your doctor about finding someone who can recognize the symptoms, perform the right diagnostic tests, and provide treatment.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO, 24/7.