Why Aren't African Americans Getting Diagnosed for Sleep Disorders?

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Many Black men and women who struggle with sleep apnea or insomnia haven't been properly diagnosed, according to preliminary findings about sleep disorders in the United States presented at the American Thoracic Society conference in Washington, DC. The research suggests a need for targeted interventions aimed at increased screening for sleep disorders among African Americans, and for more studies to examine how poor sleep contributes to other health disparities affecting this population group, HealthDay reports.

Sleep apnea is a disorder that causes people to stop breathing for short, multiple periods of time each night while sleeping. Symptoms include loud snoring (often with choking or gasping sounds) with intervals of silence that occur when the sleeper stops breathing. Insomnia (which can be related to sleep apnea) is a condition characterized by difficulty falling or staying asleep. It is defined as chronic when sleep is disrupted at least three nights each week and lasts for a period of at least three months.

For this latest study, researchers at Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School looked at sleep status among 825 Black men and women who participated in a larger study funded by the National Institutes of Health. Ultimately, researchers found that three in four folks in the study suffered some degree of sleep apnea and one in five experience insomnia. But only 2 percent of those troubled by sleep apnea and 7 percent of participants with insomnia said they were previously diagnosed.

"African Americans experience a disproportionate burden of numerous health problems, including obesity, diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular disease, all of which have been shown to be associated with sleep," noted Danya Johnson, PhD, MPH, a postdoctoral research fellow at Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School and one of the authors of the study. "It seems plausible that sleep apnea and insomnia are important risk factors contributing to these health disparities," she added.

What isn't clear yet is why so few Black people are being diagnosed with sleep disorders in the first place. Researchers said it's important for future studies to explore the diagnosis disparity and reasons why so many African Americans appear to have difficulty sleeping.

Click here to learn more about sleep apnea and why snoring can be a serious health issue.

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