Sleep Apnea Goes Largely Undiagnosed and Untreated in African Americans

Improved screening of Black men and women for sleep apnea could help reduce their risk of developing several chronic illnesses.

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Sleep apnea is a common sleep disorder linked to a higher incidence of heart disease, hypertension, diabetes and other chronic health disorders. Now, new findings published in the journal SLEEP show that of the approximately 80 to 90 percent of those undiagnosed and untreated for the condition, many were African Americans, reports Brigham and Women's Hospital (BWH).

For the study, researchers checked for predictors of the condition among 852 Black men and women with an average age of 63 who lived in Jackson, Mississippi, and were part of the Jackson Heart Sleep Study.

Among participants, scientists found that more than 95 percent of these individuals weren't diagnosed or treated for sleep apnea, which causes nightly episodes of stopped breathing and oxygen levels to fall.

While 24 percent of the study's participants suffered from moderate or severe sleep apnea, only 5 percent received a diagnosis from a doctor. Findings also showed that men were 12 to 15 percent more likely to develop sleep apnea than women.

"Untreated sleep apnea can increase risk for hypertension-related diseases such as stroke, a condition disproportionately common in African Americans," said Dayna A. Johnson, PhD, an associate epidemiologist in the Division of Sleep and Circadian Disorders at Brigham and Women's Hospital and lead author of the study.

Johnson added that researchers also learned that asking questions about individuals' snoring habits and measuring their neck size (those with larger necks are at a higher risk of sleep apnea) helped to determine someone's risk for sleep apnea.

Scientists concluded that because there is a large burden of untreated sleep apnea among African

Americans, the findings showed that improved sleep apnea screening and diagnosis offered an opportunity to reduce health care disparities in this population group.

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