Snoring and Sleep Apnea Linked to Greater Risk for Heart Damage in Women

Women with either condition may suffer cardiac damage earlier than men with the conditions.

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Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) and snoring are a threat to cardiac function in both men and women. But in women, the heart seems more affected by the conditions, putting women at greater risk of worsened cardiac function, suggest new findings presented at the annual meeting of the Radiological Society of North America (RSNA), reports RSNA.

Sleep apnea refers to a group of disorders in which sleepers' breathing stops and starts repeatedly; OSA is the most common of these conditions. OSA occurs when the muscles of the throat relax intermittently and block an individual's airway.

Researchers reviewed the cardiac MRI scans of 4,877 participants stored in an international health resource called the UK Biobank. Scientists divided these folks into three groups: those with OSA, those with self-reported snoring and those without either condition.

Results showed that both sexes who suffered from OSA and snoring also experienced an increase in left ventricular mass or an enlargement of the walls of the heart's main pumping chamber, which makes it harder for the heart to function properly. (Men also showed a boost in ejection fraction, the percentage of the heart chamber's total volume that is pumped out with each heartbeat.)

But researchers noted that women who snored were more likely than men to exhibit a significant increase in left ventricular mass that put them at greater risk for heart problems.

"We also found that the prevalence of diagnosed OSA in the study group was extremely low," said Adrian Curta, MD, a radiology resident at Munich University Hospital and lead author of the study. "Together with the alterations in the cardiac function in the snoring group, it leads us to believe that OSA may be grossly underdiagnosed."

According to the researchers, the findings also suggest that the evolution of snoring to OSA is associated with the enlargement of the heart's left ventricle, an independent predictor for

increased adverse events and in-hospital mortality in many procedures.

Curta encouraged those who snore to get screened for OSA and cautioned that these individuals require proper treatment.

Researchers plan to conduct additional studies to better understand the gender differences associated with snoring and OSA.

Click here to learn how sleep apnea goes largely undiagnosed and untreated in African Americans.

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