

Sleep apnea and gender: lessons from studying women

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Initial studies in the 1970's from sleep laboratories determined that the prevalence of sleep apnea was significantly higher in men than in women (M:F=8:1) Subsequent screening studies in the general population determined that the prevalence was actually less disproportionate (M:F=2:1). Women were being sent for assessment less frequently, although they had similar symptoms as men, and the severity of women's symptoms were actually better correlated with disease. Since increased numbers of women have been studied, it has also been recognized the sleep apnea can produce different symptoms such as performance problems and depression. Studies that include women have helped identify restless leg syndrome, chronic fatigue syndrome and upper airway resistance syndrome. More recent studies are investigating the association between sleep apnea, pregnancy and pre-eclampsia. At the same time studies are ongoing to understand the increased prevalence of sleep apnea in men. Techniques developed to understand upper airway compliance abnormalities in patients with sleep apnea are now being used to investigate vocal cord dysfunction in women.