

Clearing the Air About Sleep Apnea

There's been plenty of back-and-forth about sleep apnea testing and truck drivers over the past year, so much so that it's easy to get confused. Here's an up-to-date rundown on the dangers of sleep apnea and steps drivers can take to stay safe and healthy:

1. Sleep apnea is dangerous to you and others.

The most common type, called obstructive sleep apnea (OSA), happens when the airway in your neck collapses during sleep. This blocks the airway, causing you to stop breathing briefly. In someone with mild OSA, breathing stops about five times per hour. In someone with severe OSA, breathing can stop as much as once a minute. Because OSA robs you of a good night's sleep, it raises your risk for drowsiness, which puts you and other motorists at danger.

2. Sleep apnea testing is not federally mandated.

The U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) planned to pass a mandatory sleep apnea testing law in 2018, but it didn't happen. But DOT does require all drivers to receive a physical exam every two years to maintain a Commercial Driver's License (CDL). It's up to your physician to test for sleep apnea—or for you to speak up about it.

3. Untreated sleep apnea can still take you out of service.

A study from the University of Minnesota, Morris showed that drivers who do not treat OSA are five times more likely to have a preventable crash while driving. That's why fleets take it seriously. Truck drivers with uncontrolled OSA run the risk of losing their CDL until they can prove to a medical examiner that they are successfully managing it and can drive safely.



4. Sleep apnea is controllable.

The most common treatment for OSA is with a Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) device. It provides a constant flow of air pressure through a tube and mask while you sleep. This keeps your airway open.

5. These warning signs may indicate sleep apnea.

If you have a body mass index (or BMI, a measure of body fat based on your height and weight) equal to or greater than 33, you're at high risk for sleep apnea. The same is true for men with a neck size greater than 17 inches, or women with a neck size greater than 15 inches. Symptoms include snoring, daytime sleepiness, irritability, depression and attention problems.

If left untreated, OSA can cause high blood pressure, diabetes, heart attacks or strokes. If you suspect you have OSA, talk with your doctor. Recognizing you have it and getting it treated can save your life and the lives of others.