

Sleep Apnea and Women's Health
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Sleep apnea is caused by the constriction of the airway impeding air from entering the lungs. This condition prevents oxygen from reaching the cells in the body. When this happens, a person with sleep apnea must "compensate" for this by waking up or changing position, thus opening the airway.

This reaction to oxygen deprivation is of the highest priority for the body, since one cannot survive without oxygen.

To keep itself alive, the body compensates in a number of different ways to maintain the flow of oxygen to the cells and tissues. The ABC's, sequence in cardio-pulmonary-resuscitation – A for airway then B for breathing and C for circulation demonstrates how keeping the airway open is essentially the first, therefore, highest, priority for its survival.

The most immediate influence upon the body's survival mechanism is a threat to airflow that enables exchange of oxygen to the cells and carbon dioxide from the cells. Any threat to airway and airflow triggers the "flight or flight" or "stress" response with the release of "adrenaline type" stress hormones into the blood stream.

These hormones not only impact the whole body through facilitating the flow of impulse from one nerve to another, they activate all of fibers in muscles including the walls of blood vessels, the rhythm and tempo of the beating of the heart and our breathing, they also impact the balances of the hormones through the whole hormonal (endocrine system).

Our whole "body, mind and spirit" is impacted by the activation of our "stress response". It is one of the three observed body compensations for constrictions in the throat area associated with the jaw-tongue-throat relationship.

The compensations are:

- Fight or Flight Response
- Postural changes (usually forward head posture) and
- Clenching and/or grinding of the teeth,

How the dental (jaws, tongue) and associated structures relate to the throat and, therefore, entire body is what has been referred to as "Oral Systemic Balance".

Because women and men have hormonal and anatomical differences, the potential for and nature of sleep apnea symptoms vary. Analyses from referrals to different Sleep Disorders Centers show that women with obstructive sleep apnea have a greater tendency to report symptoms of fatigue and lack of energy than men. Sleep apnea being higher in post- versus pre-menopausal women illustrates obvious hormonal influences.

For more information see my previous three part series of articles in Your Health Magazine titled "Women, Breathing, Sleep Apnea, Menopause, Posture and More..." from Spring 2008.