

# Safety Talks!

## Sleep Apnea and Safety

### WHAT'S AT STAKE

Think back to the last time you came to work after a night spent tossing and turning – or with no sleep at all. Now imagine working that way day in and day out.

People with undiagnosed sleep apnea often work without benefit of refreshing sleep. They have a condition that causes them to stop breathing frequently through the night and each time they wake it is long enough to resume breathing, but never long enough to remember having woken.

They are exhausted the next day, but have no idea why; making the condition one that is difficult to diagnose.

### WHAT'S THE DANGER

Researchers say as many as one-third of all workplace injury incidents and as many as 400,000 motor vehicle crashes yearly are caused by people who are sleep deprived as a result of conditions like sleep apnea.

Sleep apnea can cause excessive daytime sleepiness, memory lapses and difficulty concentrating and completing routine tasks. Workers may procrastinate, fall asleep while working and be impatient and irritable with co-workers.

### EXAMPLE

A commercial truck driver involved in a crash that claimed the lives of two children and their mother says he “doesn’t know what happened.” Investigators suspect the man fell asleep at the wheel as a result of undetected sleep apnea.

### HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

#### Evaluate your risk

Anyone can have sleep apnea. However, men, smokers, people who are overweight or over 40 are the most susceptible. Tell your supervisor if you have sleep apnea.

#### Self monitor

Watch for signs of sleep apnea including excessive daytime sleepiness, morning headache and a sore throat or dry mouth upon waking. Listen if your spouse complains about your loud snoring or snoring followed by periods of silence or gasps for breath.

#### Stay fit

Lose weight and reduce or quit smoking altogether and you are less likely to suffer from sleep apnea.

#### See your doctor

Talk to your doctor immediately if you suspect sleep apnea or any sleep-related problem. Effective treatment is available.

#### Sleep on your side

You are more apt to snore and/or stop breathing while sleeping on your back, so avoid this position.

#### Avoid alcohol and sleeping pills

Sedatives relax the throat muscles and can interfere with breathing. Avoid them whenever possible.

#### Take fatigue seriously

People with sleep apnea are not “just a little tired.” They are impaired and often unable to work safely or identify dangerous behavior that may be obvious to others. Speak up if you notice unsafe behavior in co-workers.

#### FINAL WORD

*Sleep apnea is a serious condition that, if left untreated, can have life-threatening consequences.*

*Never underestimate the importance of sleep and the serious consequences of working under the influence of too little sleep. ■*

## TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. A person with sleep apnea is unaware of how often he awakens during the night.  
 True  False
2. Researchers estimate sleep deprivation is the cause of \_\_\_\_\_ of all workplace incidents.  
a. one-half  
b. one-tenth  
c. one-third
3. Only those who are overweight suffer from sleep apnea.  
 True  False
4. Which of the following should someone with sleep apnea avoid?  
a. sleeping on his back  
b. spicy food  
c. naps
5. Moderate alcohol consumption is recommended for people with sleep apnea.  
 True  False

#### What Would You Do?

Your supervisor can't seem to concentrate or make decisions. He is forgetful, irritable and twice you've found him snoring loudly, his head on the desk. You suspect he may have a sleep disorder, but you aren't sure how to approach him. What do you do?

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## BEFORE THE TALK 7 PREPARATION TIPS

- 1** Adapt this safety talk to your industry and the specific dangers sleep deprivation may cause. Do workers operate equipment or drive as part of their job? Do they work shifts or put in frequent overtime?
- 2** Discuss the impact of sleep deprivation and ask workers to brainstorm reasons, other than sleep apnea, that a worker may suffer from it. (Living with a new baby, shiftwork, working two jobs, insomnia, staying up late watching TV are some possibilities.)
- 3** Ask workers to recall a time they came to work without enough sleep. How did they feel and perform? Use what's shared to spark discussion about how impaired a person without adequate sleep may feel and perform.
- 4** Is driving a core part of the work your company does, and if so, does the company have a policy limiting the number of hours a person is permitted to drive in a given day? Investigate and share what you find.
- 5** Does your company have a fatigue-management program or a napping policy? If it does, bring a copy of the policy to the meeting. If not, bring another company's policy and use it for discussion purposes. Burlington Northern Railway is one company that has a Fatigue Countermeasures Program that includes a napping policy that allows employees to nap for up to 45 minutes under certain conditions. The policy is available online.
- 6** Ask workers to recommend strategies the company and workers could implement to reduce the impact of sleep deprivation.
- 7** Talk to your human resources department about the company's policy on sick time and personal days. Does the company allow workers to take time off without pay if they feel sleep deprived and unable to function well?

- For information on a variety of safety topics, check out Bongarde's online network for safety professionals at <http://www.SafetyXChange.org>
- If you want the latest in job safety news, tips, photos, health-related articles, fatality reports and audio talks, sign up for Safety Smart! Weekly Briefing at <http://www.SafetySmart.com>

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Meeting conducted by: \_\_\_\_\_

## MEETING WAS ATTENDED BY: Each participant is to sign below, for record kept on file.

_____	_____	_____
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### Answers to T1807-01 Quiz:

1. True 2. c 3. False 4. a 5. False

## AFTER THE TALK CHECKLIST

- Provided extra training to workers who did poorly on quiz  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Observed workers  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Refresher training  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Other (describe)  
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