

Sweet Dreams

When the lights go out and the slow rhythms and deep dreams of night begin, another shift begins in Oroville Hospital's sleep lab. Here, technicians watch and monitor patients as they slumber, and as their brains plunge into light sleep, deep sleep, and then rapid eye movement sleep. In fact, many health or psychological issues may show themselves in the hours when a person is sleeping – and at Oroville Hospital, lab technician and respiratory therapist Jerry Adams has long been on duty to catch signs of these conditions.

Adams has spent hundreds of nights in the lab monitoring sleeping patients and screening them for abnormalities like apnea, snoring, sleep-walking, and insomnia. Adams notes that many sleeping disorders go undetected by the sleeper, whose only hint of poor sleep may be daytime drowsiness, irritability, and stress. Adams suggests that anyone who visits the hospital clinic for a preliminary interview about a possible sleeping disorder should bring their sleeping partner.

"Because you are the absolute worst person in the world to ask questions about your own sleeping patterns," Adams says with a laugh.

So just how serious are sleeping disorders? Some, like snoring, may be mostly nuisance, but may point to more serious issues. And sleep deprivation can be dangerous. Dr. Matthew N. Fine, Oroville Hospital's Chief Medical Officer and pulmonary specialist, says

people who are haunted by sleep apnea have an increased risk for stroke,

hypertension, heart failure, and early death.

For simple insomnia, fortunately there are simple ways to access the coveted world of deep, refreshing sleep. Adams suggests that people do as they so often tell their children to do: go to sleep at a set bedtime. He also advises that alcohol, while a depressant, can actually disrupt the rhythms and cycles of sleep. Caffeine will do the same.

Overweight people may be particularly prone to apnea – a recurring pattern where the sleeper's breathing quits momentarily, sometimes many dozens of times in an hour. Adams describes the condition, which he has observed in countless patients over the years: "You wake up startled, gasping for breath. There's a little adrenaline rush that goes with that, and it will really start to wear you down over time." And people are usually not aware that this has happened because it takes about a minute to be fully conscious.

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Clearly, better sleep means better health and happiness in our waking hours – but the key to long restorative nights of unbroken sleep is an elusive secret for many people. "And so many of us aren't happy with it," he says. Adams notes that we spend one third of our lives sleeping.

For sleep apnea, the primary treatment is CPAP (Continuous Positive Airway Pressure) which can give people back their lives. Insomnia is less serious but

harder to treat: treatment begins with "sleep hygiene," which is the promotion of good sleep habits and regular sleep.

He should know, after nine years as a nocturnal creature, Adams left the sleep lab and reverted to daytime duties at the hospital. The reason is simple:

"Staying up all night," Adams says with a glimmer of humor, "interfered with my sleep."



Oroville Hospital