

Treating Sleep Apnea

By Wendy Sullivan RN

I absolutely love being in-volved in the commercial driving industry. It is where this nurse was meant to be. Drivers are our most valuable commodity and we need to help care for their health and safety not only for their sakes, but the sake of the motoring public.

My realization about the seriousness of sleep apnea came while I was employed as an Occupational Health Nurse for a large trucking company. A trend developed among the fleet and I knew there had to be a way to do something about it. My goal was to help the driver, help the company, and help the motoring public. Changes needed to be made and I believed I had found a way to do it. Sleep apnea is a sleep disorder which causes cessation of breathing while you sleep. It can occur anywhere from 5 times an hour to well over a 100 times an hour. Sleep apnea is a disorder which worsens with age, weight gain, and is more common in males and menopausal females. Untreated sleep apnea can be a factor in high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, stroke, anxiety, depression, respiratory disorders, and heartburn. Once treated, many of these conditions improve resulting in REDUCED HEALTH CARE COSTS for the employer and the driver alike. Precision Pulmonary Diagnostics (PPD) has generated \$538-\$780 per month per treated driver in health care cost savings. Generally speaking, obstructive sleep apnea is about 1/3 to 1/2 as prevalent in women than in men. However, after menopause the prevalence in women is comparable to that of men.

Untreated sleep apnea drivers have 2-7 times the risk of a motor vehicle accident. Drivers are not fully alert and often use caffeine and cigarettes (nicotine) to compensate and help them stay awake. This of course further perpetuates unhealthy behaviors. PPD has successfully been able to REDUCE ACCIDENTS in its treated sleep apnea drivers by 30% in a cohort of 780 drivers with the cost of that accident reduced by 48%. Studies have shown that treatment of sleep apnea provides a 3.5:1 return on investment through accident reduction.(1)

When treated sleep apnea drivers feel better, it makes sense that PRODUCTIVITY would increase. When you sleep better, you work better. Drivers will often tell me that they are late on their loads trying to do the right thing by pulling over and taking a nap due to their excessive daytime sleepiness. Those delays are costing your company money as well. Investing in your drivers via a sleep apnea program may help RETENTION in your fleet. ... "my company cares about my health and safety by investing in ME." Safe and healthy drivers are your company's greatest asset.

Currently FMCSA statistics suggest that up to 28% of your fleet may be at risk for sleep apnea (due in part to a middle aged male gender, body mass index of over 30).(2) I can think of no better way to get at the majority of a fleet's health and safety issues. Screening your fleet for at risk drivers so as to only refer and treat those at the greatest risk for sleep apnea, treat those at risk and monitor driver's compliance on the back-end with

coaching and troubleshooting where necessary.

The Medical Review Board under the FMCSA is currently updating its sleep apnea guidelines for DOT examiners. While the final vote has not been rendered, sleep apnea is a subject of much focus. Ultimately, as with anything concerning your driver fleet, the carrier is ultimately responsible for who you put behind the wheel.

Help your drivers, help your company's bottom line. A corporate driven sleep initiative makes a difference.

(1)Journal Sleep, 21:871-879, 2004

(2)Pack, A.; Dinges, D.; (2002) A Study of Prevalence of Sleep Apnea Among Commercial Truck Drivers, FMCSA, Publication No. D07-Rt-02-030, Washington DC

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