

AND NOW A WORD FROM THE DOCTOR...

Memory and Sleep Apnea

By David Perlmutter, MD, FACN



Problems with short-term memory represent one of the most frequent complaints I hear when interviewing patients. Statements like “I always seem to misplace my keys” or “I don’t seem to remember names anymore” or “I often will walk into a room and then forget why I went in there in the first place” typically put into motion an in-depth search for treatable causes of declining memory. While nutrient deficiencies, side effects of prescription medications, diabetes, alcohol abuse, or even early Alzheimer’s disease may explain these common complaints, one treatable problem that doctors may not consider is sleep apnea.

Sleep apnea is a disorder in which pauses in breathing occur during sleep. These pauses may occur throughout the night and may last ten seconds or even longer.

As one might expect, a person with this disorder is not likely to be aware of the illness. The diagnosis can be made once a patient undergoes a “sleep study” which measures one’s breathing while asleep.

Dr. Ronald Harper, professor of neurobiology at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, has done extensive research into the relationship between sleep apnea and memory loss and has actually demonstrated brain changes as revealed on MRI scans in patients with sleep apnea. In summarizing his research on the topic he stated: “Our findings demonstrate that impaired breathing during sleep can lead to serious brain injury that disrupts memory and thinking.”

So if your memory is failing, hopefully you will at least remember to ask your doctor to consider scheduling a sleep study.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dail".