

Sleep disorders may affect women's health earlier than men's

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Sleep disorders are more frequently diagnosed in men, but women with the same problems may be at greater risk of health problems than previously thought.

Researchers found that the [heart problems](#) associated with [obstructive sleep apnea](#) (OSA) and snoring may show up earlier in women than in men, according to a study presented last week at the annual meeting of the Radiological Society of North America. They also found that OSA may be under-diagnosed among those who snore.

OSA affects about 22 million Americans, mostly men over age 40. If untreated, it can contribute to [high blood pressure](#), stroke, and cardiovascular [problems](#) including [chronic heart failure](#) and atrial fibrillation. It is also associated with Type 2 diabetes and depression, according to the American Sleep Apnea Association.

OSA is caused by an airway blockage. Usually the tongue falls against the [soft palate](#) on the roof of the mouth, which collapses against the throat. This causes breathing to start and stop repeatedly while sleeping. In those with severe sleep apnea, episodes can happen multiple times in a night. Positive airway pressure machines are a common type of treatment. Other treatments include weight loss, avoiding sleeping on one's back, and surgery.

For this study, researchers analyzed data from 4,800 participants in the UK Biobank, an international resource of health information, who received a cardiac MRI. They divided the group into those with OSA, those who self-reported snoring and those without any sleep-related disorders.

"Our analysis showed that in both genders of the OSA and snoring groups, there was an increase in left ventricular mass," said lead author Adrian Curta, a radiology resident at Munich University Hospital in Germany.

An increase in left ventricular mass causes the enlargement of the walls of the heart's main pumping chamber, which make the heart work

harder, he said.

But when they compared the group that self-reported snoring to the unaffected group, researchers found a more significant increase in left ventricular mass in women than in men.

Curta said the results show that it is important for anyone who snores to get the proper screening for a sleep disorder.

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