

## Fighting for a good night's rest

Sleep apnea in children can lead to more health problems

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For years, 17-year-old David Vertrees of Murfreesboro battled bouts of bronchitis, pneumonia and asthma.

"He was falling asleep and not able to focus," said his mother, Lisa Webb. "The teachers wanted to put him in special ed. I fought to keep him in mainstream."

But she knew something was medically wrong with her son, and she was right. Doctors found out he had sleep apnea, which causes brief interruptions in breathing during sleep.

During a sleep test, Vertrees had more than 100 episodes an hour where he would stop breathing and oxygen levels decreased dramatically. Webb already knew this too well, because there were many nights when she didn't sleep — instead she constantly awoke to make sure he was still breathing.

Lack of proper sleep affected his cognitive as well as physical abilities.

"I wouldn't have any energy to do stuff. ... Sometimes I stayed home from school (due to lack of energy) ... and I had trouble learning," recalled Vertrees, a student at Oakland High School.

Vertrees is one of 2 to 3 percent of children who suffer from obstructive sleep apnea and parents may not even realize it's going on, said Sleep Centers of Middle Tennessee physician Dr. Russ Gibson, who is board-certified in pediatrics and sleep medicine and pediatric pulmonary.

"Obstructive sleep apnea is a medical condition in which children have breathing difficulties when they are asleep," said Gibson, who was recently added to the staff at the Sleep Center in Murfreesboro to address the growing issue of sleep disorders in children.

One of the tell-tale signs is snoring, which may sound loud, squeaky or raspy, or your child may exhibit nocturnal "snorting," gasping or choking that awakens him, much like Vertrees did.

"The big thing is children should not snore regularly," said Dr. William Noah, medical director of the Sleep Centers of Middle Tennessee.

On average, younger children will need an average of 10 to 12 hours a night, and older youth need around eight or nine hours of sleep per night, Noah explained. Because sleep is our body's way of "recovering" each day, interruptions may affect the immune and central nervous systems dramatically. That was the case with Vertrees.

Even at a young age, children with sleep apnea may exhibit a variety of disruptive behaviors.

Gibson said other reactions might include feeling tired in the day, having problems with learning, behavior and/or medical problems — like Vertrees. "Children may have headaches in the morning, difficulty breathing through the nose, growth disturbances, poor appetite and problems with swallowing," Gibson added.

At first, the teenager used a CPAP (Continuous Positive Airway Pressure) machine that forces air through and keeps the passageway open.

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However, the CPAP wasn't fully successful. New technology with the BiPAP (Bi-level Positive Air Pressure) machine has "literally changed everything," Webb said. The BiPAP has varying levels of pressure during inhalation and exhalation, making it easier for people like Vertrees to adjust to the machine.

"I started having enough energy to run better. There'd be times if I didn't wear that machine, I could feel a difference and wouldn't have much energy," said Vertrees, who has gone on to compete — rather successfully — in the ROTC rifle team at Oakland High. His focus in school improved, thus boosting his grades.

Although some children may grow out of apnea, the likelihood is the disorder will follow into adulthood and even worsen. Apnea can cause major issues such as Type 2 diabetes and even overeating. The excessive eating can also lead to obesity, which can, in turn, perpetuate the apnea because airways are narrowed due to excessive fat that could build up in the airways. It's a vicious cycle, Noah said.

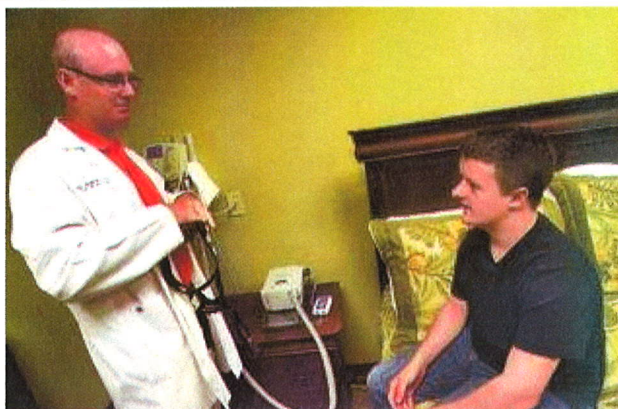
Long-term health risks increase without treatment. "Sleep apnea is a big risk factor for heart disease and stroke," Noah said.

One of the promising aspects of sleep apnea in children is it is a disorder can be cured in 80 percent of younger patients by surgery to remove tonsils and possibly adenoids, Noah said.

Getting a diagnosis may seem a lengthy process and treatment even more so.

But for Webb, getting help for her son has totally changed his outlook — and quality — of life. She believes he "wouldn't be alive" if he hadn't gotten help for apnea and she fought hard to get it for him. She said her message to other parents is to not let anything stop them from getting help for their child.

"This is his life and I'm being his advocate. I was not going to let anyone stop my son from improving," Webb said. "Now he has a chance at life."



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Chief technician Bryan Hughes, a registered polysomnographic technologist at the Sleep Centers of Middle Tennessee, prepares to put a breathing machine on patient David Vertrees. The teen suffers from severe sleep apnea that has affected his learning abilities as well as zapped his energy and weakened his immune system. (Aaron Thompson/DNJ)

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