

M.D. NEWS

Special Feature

Sleep HealthCenters Launches New ‘Sleep and You’ Initiative

Educational Outreach Program Focuses on the Overlap
Between Sleep and Chronic Diseases

By Kathryn J. Siranosian, M.S.

Can a sleep disorder complicate the management of diabetes? Yes, it can. Does untreated obstructive sleep apnea increase a patient’s risk of stroke? Absolutely.

In fact, recent clinical studies have shown that inadequate amounts of sleep can have a dramatic effect on a variety of chronic conditions, including diabetes, stroke, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, obesity and kidney disease.

As a result, Sleep HealthCenters, the largest provider of sleep diagnosis and treatment in New England, recently launched an ambitious initiative. The company’s new “Sleep and You” campaign targets both referring physicians and patients, and is aimed at improving awareness about the interplay between sleep and chronic diseases.

“There’s a lot of overlap between sleep and other medical conditions, and our goal with ‘Sleep and You’ is to facilitate the ability of patients to understand this,” says Douglas B. Kirsch, M.D., Regional Medical Director for the Brighton-based Sleep HealthCenters. Board-certified in both neurology and sleep medicine, Dr. Kirsch completed a sleep medicine fellowship and was an assistant professor at the University of Michigan before joining Sleep HealthCenters in 2006. He is also a clinical instructor in medicine at Harvard University Medical School. “Through this program, we want to teach people about how sleep may be connected to their pre-existing condition. Then, working with their referring physician, we can go forward and try to treat them better than they’re being treated.”

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Douglas B. Kirsch, M.D., is the Regional Medical Director of Sleep HealthCenters

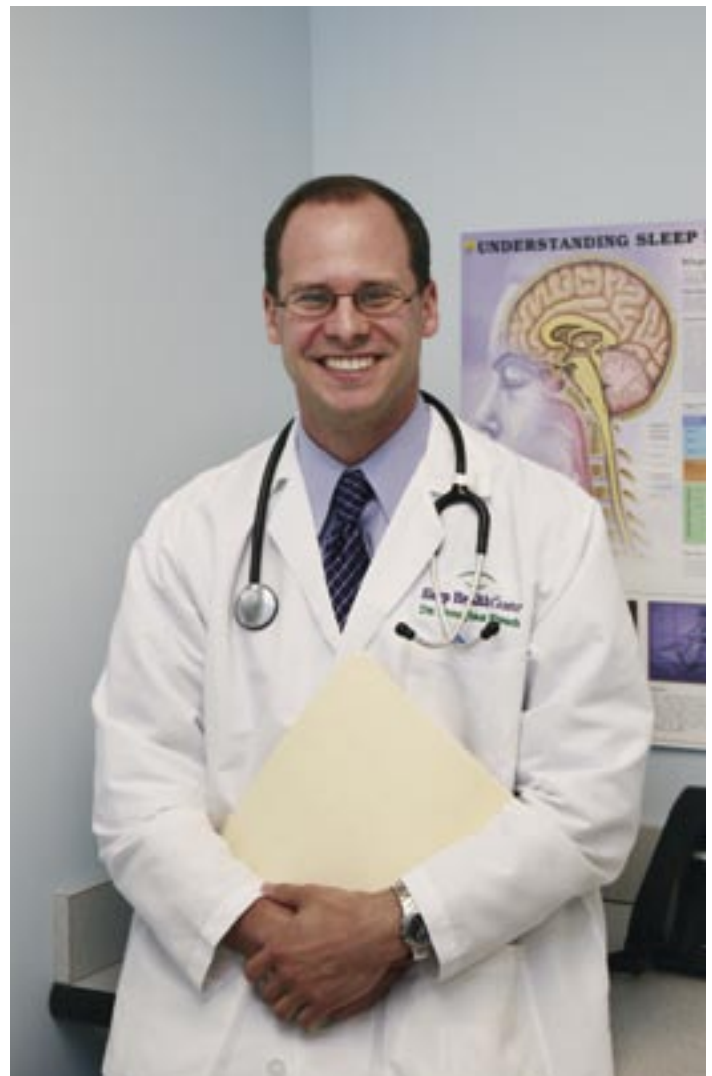


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It's a new philosophy for approaching sleep. It's recognition that sleep plays a pretty large role in a number of disease states. We're trying to help patients better understand how sleep can affect their specific disease, and for them and their referring doctor to understand if their sleep needs to be evaluated to try and help control that disease.

— Douglas B. Kirsch, M.D., Regional Medical Director for Sleep HealthCenters

untreated sleep disorder may complicate the management of diabetes.

“A patient with diabetes may also have sleep apnea,” explains Dr. Kirsch. “And, even though the sleep apnea is unrelated to the diabetes, if someone has both, their diabetes may be less well controlled. If we can treat the sleep apnea, the diabetes may be better controlled, and the patient's risk lowered.”

Diabetes and sleep are related in other ways, as well. For instance, diabetics are at risk of nerve damage that can result in restless leg syndrome.

“The new research shows that we should be working closely with patients who have diabetes,” Dr. Kirsch says.

Similarly, studies published over the past few years have

linked sleep disorders with other chronic medical conditions. People with obstructive sleep apnea, for example, have an increased risk for hypertension, heart disease and stroke. In addition, sleep apnea has been shown to both complicate the control of epileptic seizures and impede the effective management of certain lung diseases, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Recently,

other research suggested that, like diabetics, patients with kidney disease have a higher risk of restless leg syndrome.

Sleep HealthCenters' new initiative focuses specifically on these patient populations. The “Sleep and You” program includes a new website (www.sleepandyou.com), a series of brochures, physician presentations and other educational outreach — all designed to offer both patients and medical professionals the latest information about how sleep can impact pre-existing diseases and how chronic medical conditions can impact sleep.

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Dr. Kirsch conducts a sleep medicine evaluation with a patient.





PHOTO BY DEBRA TROYANOS

Douglas Kirsch, M.D., and Matt Graf review a sleep study.

them and their referring doctor to understand if their sleep needs to be evaluated to try and help control that disease.”

Innovative programs like “Sleep and You” are nothing new to Sleep HealthCenters. Founded in 1997, the company has become a regional leader in the field of sleep medicine by offering cutting-edge, multidisciplinary care in the community setting.

Sleep HealthCenters are now located throughout eastern Massachusetts in Bedford, Beverly, Boston, Brighton, Dartmouth, Framingham, Jamaica Plain, Medford, Stoughton, Weymouth and Worcester, and the network includes affiliations with Brigham and Women’s Hospital, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Faulkner Hospital, Hallmark Health, Marlborough Hospital, Mass Eye and Ear Infirmary, McLean Hospital, New England Sinai Hospital, Southcoast Hospitals Group and UMass Memorial Medical Group.

The staff at Sleep HealthCenters currently includes more than 100 medical professionals, including 22 physicians who are board certified in sleep medicine, certified respiratory therapists and specially trained sleep technicians. Working together in multidisciplinary teams, these sleep specialists offer comprehensive treatment plans customized to each patient’s individual sleep

health needs. In particular, Sleep HealthCenters provides diagnostic testing services (including overnight physiologic studies, known as polysomnograms), sleep medicine clinics, CPAP management programs, behavioral sleep medicine programs and dental sleep medicine programs.

“One of the things that attracted me to Sleep HealthCenters was their approach to sleep medicine. It’s an integrative approach, one that looks at not only sleep apnea, but also the other diseases in sleep,” says Dr. Kirsch. “For example, we cover insomnia and bring on cognitive behavioral therapists to work with those patients, in addition to having clinicians. Even our approach to sleep apnea is different in that we involve respiratory therapists in the process. That way, if a patient is referred for CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure), they can get CPAP on-site and have a respiratory therapist to meet with them on a regular basis. That helps with compliance and with making sure that the patient is comfortable with the device.”

In addition to their clinical work, the physicians at Sleep HealthCenters also serve on the teaching faculty at Boston’s major academic medical institutions, including Brigham and Women’s Hospital, and Harvard University Medical School. Because

many of these physicians are active in sleep medicine research, as well, the company can offer patients the most cutting-edge approaches currently available in this rapidly evolving field, Dr. Kirsch says.

In some ways, our 24/7 society has devalued sleep, and that's unfortunate. Patients come in all the time and say, "No one actually gets that eight hours of sleep, do they?" And, I say, "Yes, some do — and they actually feel better because they do."

— Douglas B. Kirsch, M.D., Regional Medical Director for Sleep HealthCenters

"We're able to stay cutting-edge because this company is a mix of academia and private practice physicians," he explains. "We all meet on a regular basis to discuss changes, like new technology and new research."

For example, Dr. Kirsch points out that he is currently participating in a research project designed to test in-home sleep apnea monitoring devices. Despite the considerable progress made over the past decade, Dr. Kirsch says that researchers are

continually trying to fine-tune both the diagnosis and treatment of sleep disorders, particularly sleep apnea.

"We need to continue to educate patients and doctors about the importance of sleep, and we need better ways to find patients

who need treatment," he says. Diagnostic devices that are comfortable and convenient for patients to use at home may help doctors identify patients who can most benefit from some kind of sleep therapy.

"In some ways, our 24/7 society has devalued sleep, and that's unfortunate," Dr. Kirsch concludes. "Patients come in

all the time and say, 'No one actually gets that eight hours of sleep, do they?' And, I say, 'Yes, some do — and they actually feel better because they do.' We can help people get the sleep they need, and that's going to help them with lots of other health issues, too."

For more information about the Sleep and You initiative, please call (877) 753-3742 or visit www.sleepandyou.com. ■

Back Row (left to right): Amanda Spartichino, patient care coordinator; Andy Richard, technologist; Matt Graf, lab coordinator; Dalila Bardales, patient care coordinator; Gary Kirchner, CPAP counselor. Front Row: Dr. Douglas Kirsch, Regional Medical Director; Deb Brodeur, Patient Care Supervisor; Suzanne Halsey, nurse practitioner; Cindy Sullivan, CPAP counselor.



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