

# Workers with Sleep Apnea More Likely to Get Injured on the Job, Says Study



Several studies have shown the impact of worker fatigue and sleepiness on the likelihood of suffering a workplace injury. Now a [new Canadian study](#) has found that sleep apnea could also raise the risk of getting hurt during the day at work.

The researchers found that, of more than 1,200 sleep clinic patients, those with sleep apnea were twice as likely as others to suffer a workplace injury and three times more likely to have one that was related to failed vigilance, such as tripping, falling or getting burned.

With obstructive sleep apnea, a person's airway collapses repeatedly during sleep, causing a brief period of not breathing, often followed by sudden gasping, coughing or snoring. This pattern can occur hundreds of times a night and disrupts the brain's normal sleep cycle, leading to daytime fatigue and other symptoms.

To examine the link between sleep apnea and workplace injuries, the researchers looked at a group of patients of the BC Hospital Sleep Laboratory between May 2003 and July 2011. All 1,236 patients had come in to be screened for obstructive sleep apnea, with 994 ultimately being diagnosed with the condition. The researchers analyzed data on workplace injuries for the entire group over the previous five years collected by

WorkSafeBC.

They found that:

- 111 patients (or 9% of the whole group) experienced occupational injuries in the past five years
- But people with sleep apnea were twice as likely as those without the condition to have experienced workplace injuries' just over 5% of people without sleep apnea got injured, while nearly 10% of those with sleep apnea suffered injuries at work
- Patients with sleep apnea were nearly three times more likely to suffer an injury that was related to vigilance or attentiveness, including those caused by falls, exposure to heat or electricity, car crashes and slipping or tripping
- However, patients with more severe sleep apnea weren't more likely to get hurt than those with moderate or mild apnea.

When the researchers adjusted their results to take into account gender, body fat, alcohol use, age and type of work, the overall connection between apnea and injuries weakened somewhat. But patients with sleep apnea were still 76% more likely than those without the condition to experience workplace injuries.

Patients with sleep apnea tend to get very fragmented sleep, explained senior study author Najib Ayas. 'A lot of times people may not remember being woken up, it's like someone going in there and shaking them awake many times per hour,' said Ayas, an associate professor of medicine at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

'They wake up and they feel quite tired during the daytime and we think that that's probably what accounts for the increased risk,' said Ayas.

But this study may actually underestimate the link between

sleep apnea and workplace injuries.

In this study, people with sleep apnea were being compared to people who were coming in with other sleep issues, noted Eva Lindberg, a professor at Uppsala University in Sweden who studies sleep breathing disorders. The injury risk associated with apnea might be even higher if sleep apnea patients were compared to people with no sleep issues at all, she said.

*Bottom line:* Employers should screen workers for sleep apnea, especially in safety sensitive workplaces, and help those with the condition get appropriate treatment for it.

The OHS Insider has articles, tools and other resources you can use to address sleep deprivation and fatigue in your workforce, including:

- The [10 Dangers of Worker Sleep Deprivation](#)
- Why you should [let workers take naps](#)
- How to [implement a fatigue risk management system](#)
- A [fatigue hazards identification checklist](#)
- A [model fatigue management policy](#)
- An [infographic](#) on worker fatigue to warn workers of the dangers of not getting enough sleep.