

# RWJ SLEEP CENTER

## Sisters Seek A Good Night's Rest



Jennifer Herring was always very sleepy during the day. She would get extremely drowsy while driving and fall asleep in front of the TV.

"My sleepiness was getting progressively worse and worse," said the 53-year-old piano teacher from Old Bridge. "In the last two years, it really began interfering with my life."

This summer, while she was filling in for the organist at her sister's church, she fell asleep during the sermon. Her sister woke her up before she embarrassed herself in front of the congregation. But that was enough to prompt her to seek help.

At the urging of her sister, Carolyn Herring, who has sleep apnea, Jennifer went to Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital's (RWJ's) Sleep Center in August for an overnight sleep study. She, too, was diagnosed with sleep apnea, a disorder in which breathing is repeatedly interrupted during sleep. She began using a Bilevel Positive Airway Pressure (BiPAP) machine at night to help her breathe better and get more rest.

"The first night I put it on, it was the best night's sleep I had in my life," Jennifer said.

Her sister, who lives with her, uses a similar Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) machine to keep her airway open during sleep. Carolyn, 55, went to RWJ's sleep center in 2011 after struggling to stay awake during the day and her daily 75-minute commute. An overnight sleep study showed she stopped breathing 59 times in an hour.

"The CPAP made a big difference," said Carolyn, who is a professional photographer. "I felt it almost immediately that I was getting better sleep and was more rested."

The Herrings have another sister who was diagnosed with sleep apnea. They also suspect that their father had the disorder.

"While there is no sleep apnea gene identified as yet, it certainly runs in families," said Anays Sotolongo, MD, Assistant Professor of Medicine at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and Medical Director of the Comprehensive Sleep Disorders Center at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital. "This is usually because the factors that increase the risk for sleep apnea have a genetic component, such as fat distribution, the narrowness of the throat, the shape of the head and chin, and the way we respond to carbon dioxide."

More than 18 million Americans suffer from sleep apnea. Risk factors may also include being overweight, smoking, alcohol use and age. If untreated, sleep apnea can cause serious health problems, such as hypertension and heart disease.

RWJ recently merged its sleep medicine services from its New Brunswick and Somerset campuses in one location at the RWJ Sleep Center in Hillsborough. Accredited by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, the center offers diagnosis and treatment for sleep issues in children and adults such as obstructive sleep apnea, central sleep apnea, periodic limb movement, insomnia, REM disorders, upper airway resistance, narcolepsy, parasomnia, circadian rhythm disorders and restless leg syndrome.

The Herring sisters say they are glad they sought help for their sleep problems. "I have more energy during the day. I don't need to take naps any more," Carolyn said. "And I don't have to worry when I drive."

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