

Catastrophic events can affect a person's sleep

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A significant disruption of day-to-day life can take place in those areas affected by a natural disaster. One of the more recent disasters occurred when Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast in late August 2005, causing loss of lives, extensive damage, and the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of residents. Disasters such as Hurricane Katrina are more likely to affect the quality and the quantity of a person's sleep, according to a research abstract that will be presented Tuesday at SLEEP 2007, the 21st Annual Meeting of the Associated Professional Sleep Societies (APSS).

Denise Sharon, MD, PhD, of the Comprehensive Sleep Medicine Center in New Orleans, divided the participants of the study into four groups: (a) Jan. 1-Aug. 28, 2005; (b) Jan. 1-Aug. 31, 2006; (c) May 1-Aug. 28, 2005; and (d) Sept. 5-Dec. 31, 2005. The main complaints were divided across four categories: (1) Obstructive sleep apnea-related complaints such as snoring, breathing pauses during sleep or loss of continuous positive airway pressure; (2) Insomnia-related complaints such as difficulty achieving and maintaining sleep; (3) Complaints of excessive waketime sleepiness; and (4) Complaints suggesting movement disorders or parasomnias.

According to the results, among those patients presenting to the sleep center, a reversal of the gender distribution occurred after Hurricane Katrina. Prior to the storm, males in Group A and Group C accounted for 47 percent and 44 percent, respectively. After the storm, males in Group B and Group D accounted for 62 percent and 55 percent,

respectively. Complaints related to the ability to initiate and maintain sleep showed a slight tendency to increase after Hurricane Katrina, while complaints of excessive daytime sleepiness and fatigue decreased.

"Our data shows an increase in the number of male patients and insomnia complaints after Hurricane Katrina, despite an overall decrease in initial sleep medicine evaluations. This increase might be a result of existential concerns raised by the evacuee situation," said Sharon. "The task of debris cleaning in a polluted environment might have contributed to the increase in male patients."

Sharon noted that this review only included a small number of patients, and that a broader review including all of the sleep centers in the affected and the surrounding areas is needed to provide clearer information about changes in sleep complaints after a natural disaster.

The amount of sleep a person gets affects his or her physical health, emotional well-being, mental abilities, productivity and performance. Recent studies associate lack of sleep with serious health problems such as an increased risk of depression, obesity, cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

Experts recommend that adults get between seven and eight hours of sleep each night to maintain good health and optimum performance.

Source: American Academy of Sleep Medicine

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