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Ecstasy may be linked to sleep apnea

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New research shows that recreational users of the drug known as ecstasy may be at a higher risk for sleep apnea. The study is published in the December 2, 2009, online issue of *Neurology*.

"People who use ecstasy need to know that this drug damages the brain and can cause immediate and dangerous problems such as sleep apnea," said study author Una McCann, MD, of The John Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore.

Sleep apnea is a common disorder that causes one or more pauses in breathing during sleep. It has been linked to cognitive problems as well as stroke and heart attack. An estimated 15 million Americans are affected by sleep apnea. For the study, researchers tested 71 people who had used ecstasy, also known as MDMA, 25 times or more, and 62 people who had never used ecstasy. Participants were hooked up to a machine which measured their breathing and nasal pressure while they were asleep.

The study found that ecstasy users had more than eight times the risk of sleep apnea compared to people who did not use the drug. The two groups had a similar rate of people with mild apnea (21 percent of MDMA users and 27 percent of non-users), but only ecstasy users had moderate or severe apnea, with eight cases (13 percent) of moderate apnea and one case (about one percent) of severe apnea.

The study also found that the longer a person had used ecstasy, the higher the rate of sleep apnea episodes. Obesity has been shown to be a

risk factor for sleep apnea. The study found that the risk of apnea was higher for ecstasy users than for those who were obese.

"Our findings may be explained by how ecstasy damages neurons related to serotonin, a chemical in the brain that is involved in sleep regulation and breathing, among other important functions," said McCann. "Sleep apnea in itself is dangerous, but it can also contribute to thinking problems in people who use ecstasy because chronic sleep disruption is known to have a negative effect on how a person functions during the daytime."

Source: American Academy of Neurology (news : web)