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THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF SLEEP APNEA ON HEART RHYTHM: UNDERLYING MECHANISMS AND CLINICAL CONSEQUENCES

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Abstract: This review examines how sleep apnea influences heart rhythm over time, highlighting the biological processes that trigger arrhythmias in people with obstructive sleep apnea (OSA). OSA involves repeated airway blockages during sleep, causing ongoing cycles of low oxygen, oxidative damage, and excessive sympathetic nervous system activity. These changes reshape the heart's electrical signals and structure, raising the chances of atrial fibrillation, ventricular arrhythmias, and sudden cardiac death. Grasping these pathways is key to creating specific treatments that lower heart-related risks and deaths in OSA patients.

Keywords: Sleep apnea, heart arrhythmia, low oxygen, sympathetic overdrive, atrial fibrillation, oxidative damage, autonomic imbalance.

Main Text

Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) stands out as a major standalone risk for heart disease. It impacts around 10–15% of adults, featuring frequent airway collapses at night that lead to drops in oxygen levels, rises in carbon dioxide, and broken sleep. Such disruptions deeply affect the heart's electrical activity, nervous system balance, and tissue makeup.

The core link between OSA and irregular heartbeats is chronic intermittent hypoxia (CIH). Each breathing pause lowers blood oxygen, sparking sympathetic nerve surges via chemoreceptors. This releases stress hormones, tightens blood vessels, and spikes blood pressure and pulse. Repeated over years, it fosters lasting sympathetic dominance, altering heart cell electricity and boosting spontaneous firing in pacemaker cells.

Oxidative stress is equally critical. CIH generates harmful reactive oxygen species (ROS) that harm cells, mess with calcium flow, and weaken connections between heart muscle cells. This damage drives scarring and tissue changes, especially in the atria, setting the stage for atrial fibrillation (AF).

Autonomic imbalance adds to the problem. Sympathetic nerves ramp up during apnea, while parasympathetic ones kick in during recovery breaths. These swings create electrical instability and brief conduction issues. Prolonged exposure can permanently shift vagal control and blood pressure reflexes, both tied to arrhythmia onset.

Inflammation further worsens heart effects from sleep apnea. Cycles of low-then-high oxygen activate pathways like NF-κB, boosting cytokines such as IL-6, TNF-α, and CRP. These promote blood vessel issues, atrial scarring, and conduction flaws. Studies link higher CRP in OSA to worse arrhythmias.

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At the cellular level, OSA tweaks heart ion channels. Low oxygen changes potassium and calcium channel expression, extending action potentials and risking early afterdepolarizations (EADs) plus triggered beats. Uneven ventricular recovery, seen as prolonged QT intervals, appears often in OSA and heightens sudden death risk.

Over the long haul, ongoing hypoxia, oxidative harm, and inflammation cause atrial growth, left ventricular thickening, and fibrosis. These alter signal spread and heart pumping, increasing heart failure odds—which in turn amplifies arrhythmia susceptibility.

Clinical Relevance

Viewing sleep apnea as a treatable arrhythmia trigger carries big practical weight. CPAP therapy, the top OSA treatment, dampens sympathetic bursts, curbs nighttime pressure spikes, and cuts AF return post-ablation. Screening early for OSA in those with unexplained rhythms or stubborn high blood pressure is vital for full heart risk control.

Conclusion

Sleep apnea profoundly disrupts heart rhythm long-term via intertwined hypoxia-driven oxidative stress, nervous system chaos, and heart tissue remodeling. Together, these fuel arrhythmias from mild extra beats to deadly fast ventricular rhythms. Proper OSA handling can ease these dangers, underscoring the need for combined heart-lung care today.

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