Snoring is often the subject of humor and teasing, but snoring can have a serious affect on health and quality of life. Snoring has been documented to exceed 90 decibels, which is equivalent to sleeping next to a chainsaw or jackhammer. Snorers have been known to damage their own hearing with chronic exposure to the loud snore noise. Civil complaints have been filed by neighbors forcing loud snorers to close their windows at night. Snoring has been cited on legal documents as the grounds for divorce. When a husband or wife snores, 80% of these couples end up sleeping in separate beds. But, snoring can do more than make you an unpopular houseguest or chase away the bed partner.

Besides the social ramifications, snoring can also have serious effects on sleep quality and health. Snoring amounts to resistance in breathing and this resistance disturbs sleep and leaves one feeling tired the next day. Snoring leads to increased incidence of sleepiness-related accidents, memory problems and depression. In some cases, the snoring is associated with partial or complete blockages of breathing called sleep apnea. About 15% of snorers are found to have sleep apnea. Sleep apnea increases your risk of high blood pressure and possibly heart failure, stroke, an abnormal heart rhythm (atrial fibrillation) and heart attacks. Although someone with sleep apnea may be asleep for 7 or 8 hours, they may never achieve the deeper stages of sleep. When they wake up, they do not feel rested. Sometimes a bed partner will notice that the person seems to stop breathing when they are asleep, but the episodes that can be observed by others are usually the tip of the iceberg. The majority of sleep apnea sufferers are not aware that they have it. Sleep apnea can affect children as well as adults.

Diagnosis of sleep apnea is possible with a physical examination and specialized sleep tests that measures breathing during sleep. Though potentially serious, sleep apnea is highly treatable. There are a wide variety of effective treatments depending on the nature and severity of the problem. The most effective treatment for sleep apnea involves wearing in nasal mask during sleep that delivers air under pressure (to hold the airway open); this treatment, continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP), can usually eliminate 100% of the apnea and carries no serious side effects. One million Americans are treated with CPAP nowadays. Other treatments include surgical procedures to modify the airway, dental/oral appliances worn during sleep, weight loss, sleep position changes, and medications in select cases. Treatment can normalize breathing and restore sleep quality; this lifts the associated risk to heart and brain function.

For more information about sleep disorders, call the Elliot Sleep Evaluation Center at 663-6680 or Elliot On-Call at 663-4567.