

Carmen Chu – Bonus Episode Transcript

Carmen Chu 00:00

[bubbly electronic music] My name is Carmen Chu. I am currently 43 years old. I am a cancer survivor and I live with my husband and two children up in Markham. I work as a fundraising professional in one of the downtown hospitals. I've been diagnosed with sleep apnea earlier this year in March. I was diagnosed with stage 2 breast cancer in March 2022 and, for the remainder of that year, I was going through some active treatments including radiation therapy and two procedures. And so, in the year of 2023, it was really a year of quiet treatments, but also a phase of going through several symptoms and also going through menopause, as well. And, throughout that year, I've had weight gain, I've had hot flashes, muscle aches, and interrupted sleep, and by late December in 2023, I raised the concerns to my family doctor and he has asked me to go through a sleep test and to see a respirologist to see what can be done to increase the quality of my sleep, and I've gone through a sleep test in February 2023.

After my physician has prescribed a requisition form for me to do a sleep test, I would pack my bags and I would be in my pajamas and I would go into this test clinic and be there for the night and, before I go to bed or before I go to sleep, they would have monitors hooked up onto several parts of my body, both in my head, my arms and my legs, and to my heart, and these are monitors to test the times that I have stopped breathing or there are changes in my heartbeat or in the movements of my body, and these are all different indexes that contribute to the diagnosis and the test score that I would eventually get.

[music continues] And so, I would be there maybe from 9 o'clock at night until the 6 o'clock in the day. There would be dedicated personnel monitoring throughout my night, in terms of the movements that I have or, you know, significant changes to my body while I sleep at night. In fact, I had my very first sleep test almost 12 years ago in 2011, and at that time, I had asked for also help to get better sleep, and back then, the test results came back that I was actually mild and not in a stage where it needs active treatment. However, I know, with life changes, with having two kids, I've changed actually two jobs throughout those years and, you know, obviously with cancer treatments and with symptoms that I'm managing, this time around, I notice very much that my sleep is very interrupted and, even when I do feel like I have sleep, I don't actually feel energized in the morning. And, it has deeply affected my work life, my family life, and also just keeping up with my daily activities.

So, I felt the need to get professional help, and so I went to my family doctor. My family – in terms of family, my father is also diagnosed with sleep apnea, so I know there are CPAP machines that could help with people who are diagnosed with this diagnosis, but I was not sure what it entailed and what the effects would be other than, you know, the first early stages of experiencing really fatigue and just not energized during the daytime. [music fades out]

[gentle electronic music] Before going to my family physician, I have repeatedly experienced just really fatigue and, for example, when I'm driving to work, which is approximately an hour to an hour and a half drive from home to the office, I would have to make one to two stops throughout that time, just maybe parking in a plaza or a side road to take a 15- to 20-minute quick nap so that I can continue this journey back home and on days where I have to be, you know, taking the train, I would certainly, you know, then take advantage of, you know, taking a quick nap during the GO train ride, as well.

And, it is not just the naps that's bothering, but it's like trying to just stay focused in work and you know that you have to really focus in, you know, working with numbers or seeing a client and just not having that energy or quality rest the night before really impacts work life, but also how I manage work, as well. So, there are a few facets that I feel like that sleep is so important. And, when I did not get that sleep, I really needed to seek professional help.

I think, as working moms, getting quality sleep is a challenge to begin with, but especially for my case, because I had gone through, you know, different stages in terms of my treatments and symptoms, the menopausal effects really have taken on a toll because I was navigating both what menopause is like, but also what the recovery of cancer would be like. [music fades out]

[driving electronic music] So, having, you know, several factors come into play and just not knowing what I can do to get better rest was a challenge. I think, like, we don't have the education we require to know what this restful, quality sleep is like and what does it feel like to have good sleep. You know, we try different things to say, "Oh, I really need a healthier lifestyle." We eat healthier, we work out, and we have, you know, good exercise on a weekly basis. But, I think the attention of what is good sleep or what does good rest mean, we're just lacking that sort of information out there and it is rare that, you know, one would proactively seek for that type of information and to get validated and trusted resources online right now. So, my preference is still to go to the professionals and seek their advice on important things like this.

[music continues] In March 2024, after doing the sleep test, my respirologist had said I have severe sleep apnea and her recommendation was that I would have to use a CPAP machine. And, since then, I have started using the machine and I have truly seen the benefit of that device. [music fades out] [rhythmic electronic music] It is a device that I connect to both my nose and it has oxygen fed to me, and it is actually customized based on the results of my sleep test, so the level of oxygen that it feeds-- and these smart devices are quite good now that, you know, they also provide some moisture to make my body feel better, and then there's also an automation in terms of how warm the air is that's being fed.

It took me about two weeks to really adjust to sleeping with the CPAP machine and, after that, I have experienced, you know, an uninterrupted six to seven hours of sleep at night. It is very transformational because I feel very energized. I feel the difference. I can actually focus in work. I actually have the energy to do exercise, and that difference with good quality of rest leads to much better outcome in all the other things that I can do during the daytime, so I highly recommend it to those who can benefit from it. I think this can be helpful to a lot of people that are young or old in different stages of life, as well. [music fades out]

[light electronic music] I think, for my family, that, for my kids, they see that I wear this, you know, funny headset on my head when I go to sleep. They would query whether this would be, you know, hurtful in any way and I assured them that it would not be. But, particularly, I feel like I'm an ambassador for the CPAP machine now because I feel like, you know, families of mine or my husband could really use it as well because, you know, I noticed the snoring from his sleep and these are all early signs of sleep apnea. And so, I want to set an example to him that, you know, go get treated or at least get seen by a professional, whether you need one, and if you do, I think this could be very helpful, not just on the energy- and on the daytime activity-wise, but good sleep leads to better heart health, better brain health, and you're just, like, brighter and just, you know, healthier because, from what my respirologist has been telling me, when our body is at rest, your heart also goes through, you know, the sleep that it needs to, and the rest that it needs, and in particular our brain, right? Because our brain instructs everything that we do during the day, but

also at night, so getting that good quality of sleep really helps our brain to get the rest that it deserves. [music fades out]

So I feel like, once you get the benefits of good sleep and quality sleep, you have a bigger drive to seek for more good motivation to do both exercise, but I think all that leads to, you know, you just being a happier person. [energetic electronic music] And, when you do seek out to do more good things, this can help, both among your friends circle and your family as well, because, you know, seeing my father that has benefited from this as well, he's also a believer that this can help with his health and him being a senior, too. So, I think, once you have the rest that you need, people around us can feel that you have more time and energy to spend time with them. And, the first beneficiaries would be my family, but I think my friends would know, as well, that I can actually spend more time going out with them or doing exercise or doing other fun activities with them. So, I think all that is good and needed benefits for everybody and not just, you know, those who struggle through certain phases of recovery, but just any normal person and, in a way, particularly women because there's a lot on their plate at all times.

So, before I was diagnosed with sleep apnea, I was constantly deprived of rest and I would say I'm a person that I always need to take naps throughout the day and sometimes multiple naps per day, and I actually struggle a lot with, you know, focusing in work for a longer stretch of time and, ever since I've had the professional advice and I was diagnosed with sleep apnea with the CPAP machine and with the support that I needed to use the machine properly, I think I'm a brand new person in many different ways because I think I am much more energized during the day. [music fades out] I can bring in positive energy to my colleagues and my friends, but also, you know, I can actually focus on the things that I want to focus on at certain times of the day. [pensive electronic music] I wouldn't be so distracted. I can drive safely on the road and keep my well-being safe and happy. So, those are the few things that I feel the biggest difference in terms of properly treating the sleep apnea and not ignoring it or neglecting it.

[music continues] I would really encourage those who suspect that they might have some of those symptoms to really ask your doctor and go for that first sleep test because, as I mentioned, my first sleep test was done 13 years ago and, at that time, I was diagnosed with a mild stage of sleep apnea, and if you don't need to have a CPAP machine, they would tell you won't need one, but if you are being diagnosed with a more severe sleep apnea, I think you should really get the treatment that can help you because the benefits from it is truly transformational and you will actually see it and feel it once you get used to the machine and once you have had good sleep, and those that are around you would definitely be beneficial, but most of all is your own well-being.

I think being diagnosed, but also getting the treatment I have for sleep apnea has changed my life because I feel like I have gained so many more hours in my day that I can do what I want to do, so definitely it has changed my life. [music fades out],