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Kumbhakarna's sleep was curable

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TOI illustration by Neelabh.

NEW DELHI: You may have heard many stories on why Kumbhakarna-the mythological character from Ramayana-slept so much: some say he opened his mouth to ask for "Indrasan" (seat of Indra) but he asked for Nindrasan' (bed for sleep) instead, while others claim it was goddess Saraswati who tied his tongue and made him misspeak, fearing that if Kumbhakarna became the king of the devas, there would be trouble in heaven.

However, scientists claim to have found the reason behind the problem of oversleeping. In an article published in the latest issue of the "Indian Journal of Endocrinology and Metabolism", doctors said Kumbhakarna might have suffered from hypothalamic obesity, which is caused due to abnormality in the region of brain called hypothalamus that controls appetite.

"It could have been caused due to brain tumour, inflammatory conditions such as tuberculosis or head injury which is treatable in most cases," said Dr Om J Lakhani, co-author of the study. The endocrinologist said he came across a 50-year-old patient who presented with the symptoms similar to the ones attributed to Kumbhakarna.

"The patient would sleep all day and wake up only to demand food. If the same was denied, the person would display frustration and anger as has been said in the stories about Kumbhakarna. He recovered significantly after surgery was done to remove the brain tumour causing the abnormality and medications were given to control his appetite," the doctor, who works at

Sir Ganga Ram hospital, added.



According to the legend, Kumbhakarna, brother of Ravana, used to sleep for unusually long periods of time and would be difficult to wake up. When he would wake up, he would have an insatiable appetite and would eat whatever in sight. Eventually,

he would be fatigued again and would go back to sleep. He was also described to be overweight and possess a terrible rage, which was feared by many.

The authors of the latest study claim all these attributes or symptoms fit into the description of hypothalamic obesity. "A previous publication describes him as possibly suffering from hypothyroidism and sleep apnea. We believe hypothyroidism alone cannot explain his predicament since hypothyroidism is associated with obesity with normal or reduced appetite... The presence of sham rage in hypothalamic obesity also fits with the description of Kumbhakarna," the article states.

It adds: "At one point in Valmiki's Ramayana, Kumbhakarna is described to have drunk 2,000 pitchers of water after being woken up from his slumber and summoned by his brother. Polydipsia is a well-known feature of diabetes insipidus, which in turn is a part of hypothalamic obesity and is reported in around 30% of patients. The fatigue of Kumbhakarna can be attributed to his low metabolic rate and lack of growth hormone, thyroid hormone and gonadotropins (hormones secreted by the pituitary gland)."