

## Snoring and what you can do about it

Snoring can disturb the sleep of others and lead to much unhappiness. There are things that can be done to help snoring. Many of them do not need medical help. Snoring can be a sign of a condition called obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA). This affects your breathing at night, causing poor quality sleep and makes you very sleepy during the day. If you suspect that you might have apnoea as well as snoring, discuss it with your doctor.

### Causes of Snoring

Snoring is caused by narrowing of the airway behind the tongue. This makes the walls of the throat begin to vibrate. These vibrations are the sound of snoring. So, anything which narrows your airway makes you more likely to snore, such as –

- Alcohol and sedatives (sleeping tablets), which make your airway muscles flop inwards.
- A blocked nose which makes you breathe in with more effort. The effort drops the pressure in the back of the throat, sucking in the walls. So, hayfever, a cold, smoking, or nasal polyps all encourage snoring.
- A big neck, usually due to being overweight, will squash the airway behind the tongue from the outside. If your neck is over about 17 inches, you are at high risk of snoring.
- Smoking can inflame both the nose and the back of the throat making them narrower.
- Enlarged tonsils, which block up the space at the back of the throat.
- Some medical conditions, such as an underactive thyroid gland seem to narrow the airway behind the tongue.
- The size of the airway behind the tongue will also vary with posture. If you lie on your back, gravity pushes your tongue backwards. Try lying on your side to quieten things down

There are three levels of snoring treatment.

#### Level 1

- Wax ear plugs, rather than foam ones, work best if your partner is prepared to wear them to reduce the disturbance from your snoring. Wax plugs are the only ones that reduce the low frequencies of snoring.
- Weight loss to reduce your neck size is nearly always helpful but difficult to achieve.
- Reduce alcohol, especially after 6 pm.

*[www.sleepstation.org.uk](http://www.sleepstation.org.uk) is an online version of the therapy which our sleep doctors use in clinic to treat patients with insomnia. Sleepstation is available privately and via the NHS*

- Stop smoking
  
- Keep the nose as clear as possible -this may need hayfever-type medication such as a nasal spray.
- Raise the head of the bed slightly so that one is sleeping propped up. Do not simply use extra pillows. These may kink your neck and make things worse. We suggest either putting pillows under the mattress at the head end, or using a prop under the bed frame itself. Rest your head on only one average pillow. Lifting your head and shoulders seems to reduce congestion and block in the nose and throat.
- Be very wary of purchasing one of the many gimmicks on sale through the web, or from mail order companies. There is no evidence that these work reliably. See our pdf on Dental Appliances for some that might work in some cases.

## What to Do

### Level 2

The use of dental devices to help bad snoring has become popular. If properly made, we have shown that they can work well for suitable people. They work by holding your lower jaw forward during sleep. This brings the tongue forwards too, opening up the throat air passage. The splint looks a bit like a sports gum shield and in the morning you simply remove it. There are a variety of splints available now, but they need to be carefully molded to your own gum pattern, by a dentist.

### Level 3

Some patients have tried all or most of the above – and still snore. If the problem is really disrupting your life, you may end up considering a snoring operation. However, all operations for snoring have a high failure rate - at least 25%, up to 40%, depending on the type. This is because there is usually more than one thing causing the snoring. However hard we try, we have not yet found a good way of predicting who will have a successful result. Nor can we get rid of the other side effects. So, only consider surgery as a last resort after a careful discussion of the benefits and risks with a specialist surgeon.

Source: Dr Sophie West, Regional Sleep Service, Freeman Hospital, Newcastle Upon Tyne

