

Snoring

Snoring is caused by vibration in the soft parts of tissues in the throat.

The most common reason for snoring is obesity because it leads to a build-up of fatty neck tissue that puts pressure on the airways.

Snoring can be a loud and annoying disruptive sleep disorder, which can have a huge impact on a couple's relationship and the snorer's health.

It can be a sign of an underlying condition known as sleep apnoea. This can be a very serious condition, and if left untreated, can cause a raft of health problems, including mood and personality disorders, high blood pressure, metabolic syndrome and an increased risk of heart attack or stroke.

Contributing factors

However, there can be a family history of snoring suggesting an abnormal facial/skull structure, and there may be other contributing factors such as nasal congestion, swollen tonsils or adenoids, or the use of relaxants such as alcohol or sleeping pills.

While it is vital to ensure that you rule sleep apnoea out as a cause of snoring, it is also important to remember that snoring is common in adults.

Research suggests up to 60% of men and 40% of women snore to some degree, with some regularity. It is estimated that about 10% of snorers suffer from sleep apnoea.

Getting the right advice

Almost everyone will have a suggestion on how to stop snoring, but what works for one person may not work for you.

Your doctor is a great person to get advice from on the various treatments, and can also assist in ruling out more serious health conditions.

Causes

For many people, the exact cause of their snoring will remain a mystery, but there are a number of known contributors to it, and to sleep apnoea.

These causes include:

- **Obesity** — excessive fatty tissue in the neck area puts pressure on the airways.
- **Nasal** congestion from colds, flu or allergies.

- **Swollen** tonsils and adenoids can contribute to blocked airways.
- **Pregnancy.** Snoring is most common during the last month of pregnancy.
- **Lumps** and growths, such as thyroid swelling, nasal polyps and a large tongue.
- **Allergies** or hayfever.
- **Smoking.**
- **Sleeping position.** Sleeping on your back can cause your tongue to flop backwards, blocking the airway.
- **Alcohol,** especially when consumed before bed.
- **Medications,** including sleeping tablets, oral steroids, epilepsy medication, and some antihistamines.
- **Non-pharmaceutical** sleep aids such as valerian root may also cause snoring.
- **Inflammation** of the muscle in the roof of the mouth or the uvula, the tear-drop shaped piece of tissue that hangs down in the back of the throat.
- **Abnormalities** in the bones of the face that affect the shape of the jaw, nose or airway.

Research shows that only a very small number of people go to their doctor because of their snoring, but it is important to seek professional help if snoring is causing excessive daytime drowsiness, morning headaches, recent weight gain, or waking up to a 'hangover' feeling.

Symptoms

One of the great challenges of people understanding the implications of their snoring is that they don't know they are snoring.

Many people are adamant they do not snore, but their sleeping partner — and their symptoms — may tell a very different story.

Symptoms may include:

- Daytime sleepiness that persists.
- Disturbed sleep — waking yourself up with your snoring.
- Waking up but feeling as though you haven't slept.
- Morning headache upon waking. This headache may develop into a migraine.
- Difficulty concentrating or focusing on work and other tasks.
- A dry mouth or throat in the morning.

As most snorers are unaware of their disorder, they will need to rely on others to find out about other symptoms such as the regularity of their snoring, as well as

the severity, and whether these symptoms are alleviated by factors such as sleeping positions.

If you sleep alone and are not able to ask anyone about your snoring, it may be helpful to set a tape recorder beside you before you go to sleep.

If your symptoms get worse, it is a good idea to seek advice from your doctor to rule out sleep apnoea or any other health conditions.

Your doctor will ask about your symptoms, and these questions may include the following:

- How often do you snore (every night or every few nights)?
- How loud is your snoring?
- Does your snoring wake you up?
- Does your snoring improve/disappear when you sleep in certain positions?
- Do you ever stop breathing when snoring for a few seconds?
- Do you have any other symptoms (listed above)?

It is good to know the answers to these questions before you go to the doctor, or it may be helpful to take your partner with you. Your doctor may recommend you undergo assessment by a sleep physician.

Treatment

Treating snoring can be a minefield, as there are so many different types of therapies, not to mention the many home-made treatments such as sewing a tennis ball in the back of your pyjamas.

Common treatments include:

- Losing weight.
- Regular exercise and a healthy diet.
- Dental devices to prevent the jaw falling backwards during sleep. These are similar to mouth guards, but need to be custom-designed by a dentist or oral surgeon to ensure a proper fit.
- Surgery. This could include tonsillectomy, nasal operations, removal of tissue at the back of the throat to create a larger airway or operations on the throat, tongue or palate.
- Severe snoring may be relieved by the use of a CPAP (Continuous Positive Airway Pressure) machine that delivers a constant flow of air through a fitted nose mask. This is commonly used to treat people with sleep apnoea.
- Over-the-counter nasal strips are designed to help widen the nostrils.

Snoring

- ▶ Paying attention to your sleeping position.

It is important to remember that not all treatments will be effective for everyone, so several may need to be trialled to find the one that works best for you.

There are a number of other remedies which claim to cure snoring, but these are not scientifically validated.

Some of these remedies include:

- ▶ **Mouth guards.** These can be bought off the shelf or fitted by a specialist, and are used to try and stop a person breathing through their mouth as they sleep.
- ▶ **Breathing** through the mouth is known to exacerbate snoring symptoms.
- ▶ **Sprays.** These are generally made from vitamins and oils and are designed to lubricate the throat, thereby reducing the volume of snoring.
- ▶ **Herbal** or alternative treatments may be effective, but have not been widely tested or evaluated.
- ▶ **Hypnosis.**

Lifestyle and Diet

As with many conditions that are exacerbated by obesity, lifestyle changes are important in overcoming symptoms.

These can include:

- ▶ Reduce weight and/or maintain it at healthy levels.
- ▶ Avoid alcohol, especially at night before going to bed.
- ▶ Manage blood pressure, particularly if it is high.
- ▶ Try to avoid sleeping flat on your back. Sleeping on your side may assist in reducing snoring.
- ▶ Try to avoid known allergens such as dust, cats and dogs.
- ▶ Avoid sedatives, including herbal relaxants or sedatives.
- ▶ Avoid smoking.

Leading a healthy lifestyle will maximise your chances of overcoming snoring, but sometimes it may not be possible to eradicate it completely.

Support and online resources

Support and online resources for snoring include:

The Australasian Sleep Association

— a peak scientific body that represents clinicians, scientists and researchers across the broad area of sleep.
www.sleepaus.on.net

Sleep Disorders Australia — a voluntary organisation with branches in each state.

The group provides information and support to sufferers of sleep disorders and their families.

www.sleepoz.org.au

The Australian Lung Foundation

www.lungfoundation.com.au

It'sMyHealth.com.au