

Snoring

SDA Fact Sheet AT12

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Snoring occurs when air does not flow smoothly through the air passages, or when the soft tissues or muscles in your throat vibrate during sleep. Snoring occurs in all age groups. The largest affected group however, is the middle aged population. Snoring may be associated with long term health problems such as an increased risk of heart attack or stroke. Many snoring remedies have been suggested but few have been shown to be effective.

What is snoring? Snoring is a noise generated by vibration of the soft or floppy parts of the throat during sleep. The noise is made by the walls of the pharynx – the part of the throat at the back of the tongue which is held open by several small muscles. These muscles relax when we go to sleep, narrowing the airway and partially choking off the air passage so that breathing in makes the pharyngeal walls vibrate, which makes the noise of snoring. The narrower your airway becomes, the greater the vibration and the louder your snoring.

How common is snoring? Snoring is extremely common, with up to 60% of men and 40% of women snoring to some extent or on some nights. About 25% snore on most nights. Snoring occurs in all age groups but is most common in the middle aged.

Is snoring serious? Snoring is a major social problem for many families. A snoring partner may be forced to sleep in a separate room. Snoring also deprives the sufferer and their partner of good sleep, which has consequences for daytime functioning. Medically, there is evidence that snorers are more likely to suffer from cardiovascular disease, that is heart attack or stroke. About 10% of snorers also suffer from sleep apnea, which can be a life threatening condition.

What causes snoring?

- **Obesity**, particularly around the neck, causes additional fatty deposits in the throat narrowing the air passage – you gain weight on the inside as well as on the outside!
- **Drinking alcohol** causes greater muscle relaxation during sleep than normally occurs, and can result in an abnormally floppy upper airway.
- **Breathing through the mouth** may cause snoring because tissues at the back of the mouth are more floppy than at the back of the nose.
- **A blocked nose** may cause snoring because it makes the person breathe through their mouth. A blocked nose also creates a vacuum inside the throat, which may suck air passages closed.
- **Sleeping on the back** may cause the tongue to fall backwards and block the airway. Snoring is almost always worse on the back and wearing a device to force you to sleep on your side may help snoring.
- **Abnormal lumps** such as nasal polyps, a large tongue or thyroid swellings can narrow the airway. In children large tonsils and adenoids are a common cause of snoring.
- **Allergies, hayfever and smoking** may lead to narrowed nasal passages and aggravate snoring.
- **Inherited factors.** Variations in the shape of the jaw, airway, face or nose may result in some people having a small airway.
- **Medications** can cause throat muscle relaxation, eg sleeping tablets, anaesthetic drugs, oral steroids and epilepsy drugs.

Should snoring be treated? Although many people snore, less than 5% of people have sought help from their doctor for snoring. However, if your snoring is a concern to you or others you should definitely seek help. The first step is to discuss it with your own doctor. It is a good idea to take your sleeping partner, if you have one, to the doctor with you, to fill in the gaps regarding what happens to you when you are asleep. Your doctor may suggest a referral to a specialist in sleep disorders.

What tests are available to investigate snoring?

The specialist will take a detailed history and examine your chest, heart, blood pressure, nose and throat. A test to investigate snoring and rule out more serious things like sleep apnea is usually recommended before undertaking any treatment. This is called a sleep study and is performed in a special sleep unit with a number of private, quiet, single rooms. Simple non-invasive equipment is used to measure your sleep and breathing.

Life style factors can help snoring. If you are overweight, weight loss may reduce snoring. Avoiding alcohol, at least for four hours before sleep may also be helpful. If you suffer from allergies such as hay fever, avoiding trigger factors such as dust, cats and dogs may also help snoring.

Medical treatments for snoring. A number of medical treatments offer varying degrees of success in treating snoring. Some of these may not have been studied to see if they remain effective in the long term.

- **Nasal CPAP** treatment is the best treatment for sleep apnea and is also very effective for snoring but many people find the mask and pump inconvenient. CPAP needs to be worn every night.
- **Mandibular Advancement Devices** are similar to mouth guards but push the jaw forward to make a larger airway. They are not effective for everyone and require fitting by a dentist or oral surgeon.
- **Procedures that stiffen the palate** are becoming more common to treat snoring. These may involve lasers, microwaves or injections of chemicals that cause scarring of the palate. Some initial results show promise but long term studies have not yet been completed.
- **Operations on the nose** may be helpful if nasal blockage causes mouth breathing or airway collapse.
- **Laser operations of the throat**, usually called LAUP, may work for some people but long term success has not been measured. The operation may be painful and is done by an ENT surgeon.
- **Operations that create larger airways** by removing some tissue at the back of the throat, usually called a UPPP, were popular but work only in some people and long term results have been disappointing.
- **Operations on the tongue or palate** may be recommended where these are the cause of an abnormally small airway.
- **Tonsillectomy** is a common operation for snoring children and is often effective. In adults with large tonsils it may also help.

Unproven treatments for snoring. Many remedies which claim to cure snoring have not been properly tested. Good scientific studies have either not been done or have not shown consistent improvements.

- **Vitamin and oil sprays** designed to lubricate the throat and reduce noise make claims that have not been scientifically proven.
- **Herbal or enzyme treatments** designed to treat allergies may be partly effective if this is a problem but will not work for everyone
- **Mouthguards** designed to stop mouth breathing have not been shown to be effective.
- **Nasal dilator strips** may help to keep nasal passages open but will not usually stop snoring by themselves.

Sources of help and information - If you are concerned about snoring, you should consult your family doctor. Referral from your family doctor will be necessary before you can consult a sleep physician. Patient support groups such as Sleep Disorders Australia have branches throughout Australia and hold information sessions from time to time.

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