

# SNORING

## WHAT IS SNORING?

Snoring is vibrations 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 sleep, narrowing and partially choking the airway such that inhaling makes the pharyngeal walls vibrate. The narrower your airway, the greater the vibration and louder your snoring is.

## HOW COMMON IS SNORING?

Snoring is extremely common. Up to 60% of men and 40% of women snore to some extent or on some nights. About 25% snore on most nights. Snoring occurs in all ages, but is most common in middle aged and overweight people.

## IS SNORING SERIOUS?

Snoring is a major social problem for many families. A snoring partner may be forced to sleep in a separate room. It also deprives the sufferer and their partner of good sleep, with consequences for daytime functioning. About 20% of snorers also suffer from moderate to severe sleep apnea, a condition associated with high blood pressure, heart attack and stroke. Recent studies controversially suggest snoring itself may contribute to high blood pressure and risk of heart attack or stroke.

## WHAT CAUSES SNORING?

**Obesity**, particularly around the neck, causes additional fatty deposits in the throat, narrowing the airway – you gain weight on the inside, and on the outside!

**Drinking alcohol** causes greater muscle relaxation during sleep and can result in an abnormally floppy upper airway.

**Breathing through the mouth** may cause snoring, as tissues at the back of the mouth are floppier than the back of the nose.

**A blocked nose** forces you to breathe through your mouth and create a vacuum inside the throat, which



may suck air passages closed.

**Sleeping on the back** may cause the tongue to flop back and block the airway. Wearing a device to force you to sleep on your side may help.

**Abnormal lumps** such as nasal polyps, a large tongue or thyroid swellings can narrow the airway. In children and some adults, large tonsils and adenoids are a common cause of snoring.

**Allergies, hay fever and smoking** may lead to narrowed nasal passages and aggravate snoring.

**Inherited factors** in the shape of your jaw, airway, face or nose may result in a small airway. This may cause snoring to be more common in certain ethnic/racial groups.

**Medications** can cause throat muscle relaxation, e.g. sleeping tablets, opiates, anesthetic drugs, oral steroids and epilepsy drugs.

## SHOULD SNORING BE TREATED?

Although many people snore, less than 5% have sought help from their doctor. Seek help from your doctor if it is concerning you or others. It is a good idea to bring your sleeping partner along to explain what happens when you are asleep. Your doctor may refer you to a sleep specialist.

## WHAT TESTS ARE AVAILABLE?

The specialist will take a detailed history and examine your chest, heart, blood pressure, nose and throat. A test to rule out more serious things like sleep apnea is usually recommended before any treatment. This sleep study is performed in a special sleep unit of private, quiet, single rooms. Simple non-invasive equipment will measure your sleep and breathing. Sleep studies may also be done at your home in some cases.

## LIFESTYLE FACTORS

If you are overweight, weight loss may reduce snoring. Try avoid alcohol at least for four hours before sleep. If you have hay fever allergies, avoid triggers, such as dust, cats and dogs.

## MEDICAL TREATMENTS

A number of medical treatments offer varying degrees of success. However, some may not have been studied for effectiveness in the long term.

- **Nasal CPAP** is effective in treating sleep apnea and also snoring, but many people find wearing the mask and pump every night inconvenient. It helps with breathing, but does not cure it.
- **Mandibular Advancement Devices** are similar to mouth guards but push the jaw forward to enlarge the airway. They are not effective for everyone and require fitting by a dentist or oral surgeon.
- **Operations on the nose** may help if nasal blockage causes mouth breathing or airway collapse. Making sure you have a clear nasal airway is usually the first line of treatment.
- **Procedures to stiffen the palate** are controversial and lack proper evidence. These may involve lasers, microwaves or chemical injections that cause scarring of the palate. Throat operations may be painful and must be undertaken by qualified ENT surgeons.
- **Operations to create larger airways** by removing and tightening tissue at the back of the throat can help heavy snorers. Patients must be carefully selected and operations performed by an ENT surgeon specialising in sleep apnea.
- **Operations on the tongue or palate** may be recommended where these are the cause of an abnormally small airway.
- **Tonsillectomy** is a common and effective operation for snoring children. It may also help adults with large tonsils.

## UNPROVEN TREATMENTS

Many remedies that claim to cure snoring have not been properly tested. Good scientific studies have not been done or have not shown consistent improvements.

- **Vitamin and oil sprays** claiming to lubricate the throat and reduce noise have not been scientifically proven.
- **Herbal or enzyme treatments** designed to treat allergies may be partially effective but will not work for everyone.
- **Mouthguards or chin straps** designed to stop mouth breathing have not been shown to be effective.
- **Nasal dilator strips** may help keep nasal passages open but will not usually stop snoring in itself.

## ABOUT US

*Sleep Disorders Australia* (SDA) is a voluntary not-for-profit organisation that provides information and support to people affected by sleep disorders throughout Australia. SDA advocates the needs of people with sleep disorders by raising awareness of sleep disorders and their impact on our lives. We also offer support and education with regards to preventing and treating sleep disorders.

We would be delighted if you joined us. Membership is open to sufferers, family members, medical professionals, and the general public. You can join via our website or email our membership officer for more information.

If you would like to support us financially, you can donate via our website or send a cheque to our address.

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DISCLAIMER: Information in this fact sheet is general in nature. It is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Discuss with your doctor if you are concerned about your sleep or other medical conditions.

