

Snoring and Dental Health

While snoring has been known to cause sleep deprivation to snorers and to those around them, did you know that if left untreated, it may impact on quality of life and impair general health and well being?

Snoring not only interferes with our quality of sleep, but may also cause problems such as daytime drowsiness, irritability, and lack of focus. Though it is often considered a minor problem, snorers can sometimes suffer severe impairment of lifestyle if the condition is left untreated.

Snoring may be a warning sign that normal breathing is not taking place during sleep. This may be caused by an underlying medical condition, or be an indicative sign of obstructive sleep apnea (OSA).

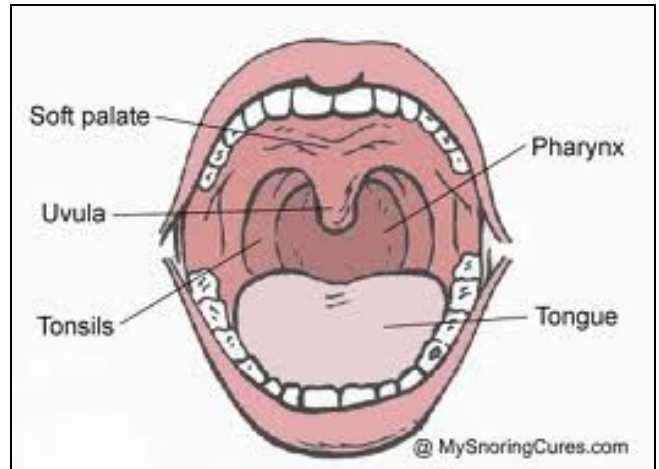
So What Exactly is Snoring and How do I know if I Snore?

Snoring is an abnormal breathing noise that occurs while someone is sleeping. It takes place when the muscles of the airway are collapsed or obstructed and therefore fail to maintain their normal function; causing noisy vibrations to be produced when air rushes against the soft palate and sides of the throat.

Generally speaking, the structures involved are the uvula, soft palate, and tonsils. The irregular airflow is caused by an obstruction in the passageway and is usually due to one of the following:

- Throat muscle weakness, causing the throat to close during sleep
- Mispositioned jaw, often caused by tension in the muscles
- Fat gathering in and around the throat (being overweight)
- Obstruction in the nasal passageway
- The tissues at the top of airways touching each other causing vibrations

- Relaxants such as alcohol or drugs relaxing throat muscles
- Sleeping on one's back, which may result in the tongue dropping to the back of the mouth.
- Enlarged tonsils



Often snoring is recognized by a friend or partner who observes the patient sleeping. Apart from sleep disturbance, more complex conditions such as sleep apnea may be consistent with the symptoms of snoring.

A simple **sleep study** would be the first step to take to in order to identify such issues and develop a suitable treatment plan. Patients can also assess their own condition to determine the likelihood of such problems based on the severity of their sleeping difficulties.

What is Obstructive Sleep Apnea?

Obstructive Sleep Apnea (OSA) is a sleep disorder characterized by abnormal pauses in breathing during sleep. A person is considered to be a sleep apnea sufferer when they stop breathing for at least 10 seconds up to or more than thirty times a night.

As mentioned previously, snoring may be an indicator of Obstructive Sleep Apnea. This constant cessation of breath during sleep places a great amount of strain on the cardiovascular system, which leads to an increased risk of heart complications such as heart attack and stroke.

Treatment Options

Treatment for snoring and sleep apnea takes on a multidisciplinary approach whereby your dentist, GP, a sleep physician or a sleep specialist may become involved in the treatment process.

Almost all treatments for snoring revolve around clearing the blockage in the breathing passage. This is why, before any therapy is performed to treat sleep apnea, snorers are advised to:

- Lose weight (if they are overweight); in order to prevent excess fat from exerting pressure on the throat.
- Stop smoking (as smoking weakens and clogs up the throat)
- Refrain from alcohol consumption and the use of sleep aids
- And sleep on their side (to prevent the tongue from blocking the throat)

First of all, it is most likely that your GP, dentist, or sleep physician will request that a polysomnogram or **sleep study** test be done. This simple test monitors your breathing patterns, sleep stages, cardiac rhythm, and airflow episodes while you sleep. Once a diagnosis is achieved, sleep apnea can be treated in many different ways:

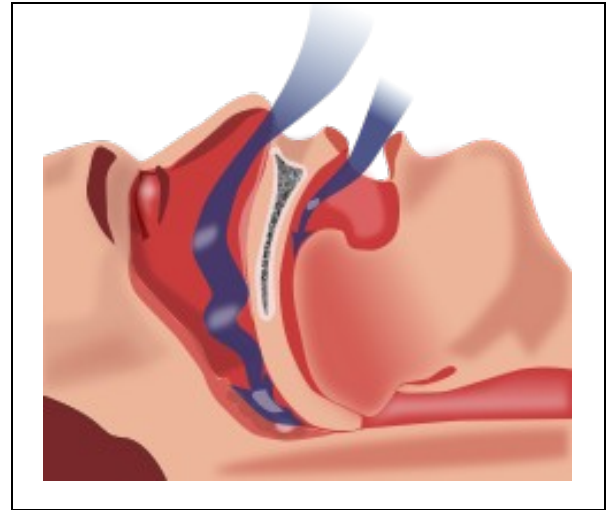
1. Oral Appliances

The most conservative approach to treating sleep apnea is to have a dental appliance fitted and made to wear during sleep. Specially made dental appliances (called splints), are made which help to advance the lower jaw slightly and thereby pull the tongue forward; causing a positive change in the position of the tongue.

An appliance worn during sleep may help to prevent the airway from collapsing by creating extra space. Only a specially trained dentist can properly select and fit the type of appliance that is required.

Advantages of treatment using an oral appliance include:

- Relatively inexpensive
- Non-invasive
- Easily accepted & incorporated into lifestyle
- Reversible



2. Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP)

A continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) machine is often used to control sleep apnea and the snoring associated with it. CPAP consists of an air compressor and mask which delivers pressurized air through the nose when a person is sleeping. This opens up the airway from inside and acts as an internal splint. A disadvantage of treatment by CPAP is patient non-compliance.

3. Surgery

Surgery is also available as a method of correcting obstructive sleep apnea. Surgery is the most invasive treatment option for sleep apnea and is performed in severe cases of airway obstruction.

Some procedures, such as uvulopalatopharyngoplasty (UPPP), attempt to widen the airway by removing tissues in the back of the throat, including the uvula and pharynx. These surgeries are usually quite invasive.

We Can Help

There are a number of treatment options available depending on the individual. Snoring is a recognized medical problem and people who snore should always seek professional medical advice on how to treat the underlying condition.

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