

Patient information from the BMJ Group

Sleep apnoea

Sleep apnoea affects your breathing at night and disturbs your sleep. During the day you feel drowsy and can't concentrate. Treatment can relieve the symptoms for many people.

We've brought together the best research about sleep apnoea and weighed up the evidence about how to treat it. You can use our information to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are best for you.

What is sleep apnoea?

If you have sleep apnoea, there are times during the night when you stop breathing for a few seconds. It happens because the muscles in your throat relax and block the flow of air.

After a few seconds, your brain recognises the problem, and makes your body start breathing again. You may wake up with a choking or gasping sound. This can happen several times an hour, all night, so you can't stay in a deep sleep.

What are the symptoms?

You may not be aware that you're waking up briefly. It may be your partner or another family member who notices the signs first.

You may feel drowsy during the day, find it hard to concentrate, or feel tired when you wake up. If you have severe sleep apnoea, you get an overwhelming urge to fall asleep in situations where you need to be fully awake.

There are lots of other things that can upset your sleep. You should see your doctor to find out what is causing your problems.

What treatments work?

Severe sleep apnoea won't get better on its own. So it's important to get treatment. There are things you can try yourself that may help, but we can't say for certain. Doctors recommend avoiding alcohol and, if you smoke, giving up. Sleeping on your side may also help.

Wearing a mask at night that blows air into your nose (or nose and mouth) can help with sleep apnoea. The name for this treatment is **continuous positive airway pressure** (CPAP). You wear a mask that's attached to an air pump by a flexible tube. The flow of air helps keep your airway open.

Lots of good studies have found that CPAP can improve your sleep and make you feel more awake during the day, especially if you have severe sleep apnoea. But the mask can cause side effects. In studies, about 4 in 10 people got a dry mouth. More than 7 in

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10 people got sneezing and nearly 6 in 10 got a runny nose, although these symptoms were quite common before people started using the device. You might find wearing the mask uncomfortable.

A **mouthpiece** works by pushing your lower jaw forwards to keep your airway open. It fits round your teeth, and looks a bit like a gum shield used for sport. Mouthpieces are sometimes used to stop people snoring. If you have sleep apnoea, a mouthpiece may make you less sleepy during the day and help you enjoy life more.

The research on mouthpieces isn't very good, but doctors generally agree they can help. In one study, about 7 in 10 people who used a mouthpiece reduced the number of times they stopped breathing by one-half. But this treatment may not be as good as CPAP. Some people who use a mouthpiece get a dry mouth, have gum irritation, or find they dribble. But these problems seem to go away after a while.

If you're overweight, your doctor is likely to advise you to try to **lose weight**. But there isn't much research on whether losing weight helps if you have sleep apnoea. For very obese people, losing a large amount of weight (between 30 percent and 70 percent of their bodyweight) can lead to big improvements in the number of times they wake at night. However, to lose that much weight most people need stomach surgery. One study found that people who lost 10 percent of their bodyweight improved their sleep.

Some people with severe sleep apnoea have **surgery**. People with very large tonsils and adenoids sometimes get sleep apnoea. An operation to remove their tonsils and adenoids may help. Another operation can widen your airway by removing some tissue from the top of your throat. Although surgery may help some people, it's not usually recommended. This is because, for lots of people, sleep apnoea comes back after surgery.

Some people take **drugs for sleep apnoea**, especially if they can't wear a mask. They may be given medicines used for other breathing problems, antidepressants, tranquillisers, or medicines to alter their sleep patterns. But the research says that, in the long term, most drugs don't help.

What will happen to me?

If it's not treated, sleep apnoea can affect how much you enjoy life. If you're sleepy during the day, you may have problems doing your job. It can also affect your driving. If you have sleep apnoea, you should tell the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) and your car insurance company.

People with severe sleep apnoea may also be at an increased risk of other health problems, such as high blood pressure. But there's not enough research to be sure about this.

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