

Snoring

Snoring is a common problem for both men and women affecting approximately 90 million American adults -- 37 million on a regular basis -- according to the National Sleep Foundation.

Most people at risk are overweight males, but snoring does affect both anybody. Snoring increases in severity with age and causes sleep disruptions in both the snorer and the bed partner.

Children who snore should be closely monitored. The National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute (NHLBI) found that 5-year-old children who have frequent snoring, loud or noisy breathing during sleep or sleep apneas scored lower on intelligence, memory and other standard cognitive tests than other children their age. Additionally, children with these types of sleep disturbances can be more likely to have behavioral problems.

Cause

During sleep, muscles in the throat relax, allowing the tongue to fall backward and the throat to become narrow. Inhaling and exhaling triggers the vibration of the throat walls, resulting in the characteristic sound of snoring. In severe cases, the walls of the throat completely collapse, cutting off the airway. This is known as sleep apnea, and can occur many – sometimes hundreds – of times during the night.

The aging process weakens the throat muscles, which causes snoring. However, anatomical abnormalities can lead to snoring as well. For example, enlarged tonsils or adenoids, nasal polyps or a deviated nasal septum can cause exaggerated narrowing of the throat during sleep and thus lead to snoring. Obesity, particularly a lot of fatty tissue around the neck, is a significant risk factor for snoring.

Functional abnormalities, such as inflammation of the nose or throat that can occur during a respiratory infection or allergy season, will result in snoring as well. Individuals who cannot breathe through their nose freely are referred to as mouth-breathers and often snore as a result of increased vibration of the throat tissues.

Other possible causes are sleep position and alcohol consumption before bed. People who sleep on their backs can constrict the airway. Alcohol acts as a muscle relaxant, which can result in snoring. Similarly, muscle relaxant medication taken in the evening may lead to or worsen snoring in some individuals.

Frequency of Occurrence

Snoring may occur nightly or occasionally.

The stage of sleep known as rapid eye movement (REM) is the most common sleep stage that snoring occurs in, however, snoring can occur during all or more than one stage of sleep.

Signs and Symptoms

Snorers who make a vibrating, rattling, noisy sound while breathing during sleep may be displaying symptoms of sleep apnea. People who snore should contact a doctor or medical professional if they have any of the following symptoms or signs:

- Excessive daytime sleepiness
- Headaches in the morning
- Recent weight gain
- Not feeling rested after waking up in the morning
- Awakening at night feeling confused
- Change in your level of attention, concentration or memory
- Observed pauses in breathing during sleep

About half of the people who snore loudly have obstructive sleep apnea. The two most common adverse health effects believed to be linked to snoring are daytime dysfunction and cardiovascular disease.

Diagnosing the Disease

Many snorers are unaware of their snoring and must rely on the observations of their bed partners, while some snorers may occasionally wake up at night choking and gasping for breath. Consult with a doctor if the snoring has become bothersome or is affecting everyday activities. A consultation with a sleep specialist may be required for diagnosis of sleep apnea.

Treatment

There are several options to help reduce severe snoring. They generally include:

- **Lifestyle modification**, such as avoidance of risk factors, sleep position training or treatment of allergies.
- **Surgery**, which is typically done on the back of the throat and roof of the mouth (or the nose, if applicable).
- **Appliances**, like oral devices constructed by a dentist who specializes in treatment of snoring and sleep apnea and also other appliances such as nasal dilators.
- **In cases of sleep apnea, a continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) appliance**, which blows room air into the back of the throat preventing it from collapsing, is recommended.

Prevention

Mild or occasional snoring can be remedied by:

- Losing weight
- Avoiding tranquilizers, sleeping pills and antihistamines before bedtime
- Avoiding alcohol for at least four hours and heavy meals or snacks for three hours before retiring
- Establishing regular sleeping patterns
- Sleeping on your side instead of your back

Resources

Some content on this page was gathered from the United States National Library of Medicine (NLM). The NLM is part of the National Institutes of Health, an agency of the Department of Health and Human Services: www.nlm.nih.gov.

- National Sleep Foundation: www.sleepfoundation.org

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