

SNORING - OR IS THAT A TRAIN I HEAR?

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Almost half of normal adults snore at least occasionally, and 25 percent are habitual snorers. Males and overweight persons suffer from snoring most often. Snoring becomes more frequent with advancing age. It's no wonder that hundreds of devices have been patented as cures for this affliction! Imagine sleeping with a tennis ball sewed to the back of your pajamas - a gimmick to keep the snorer sleeping on his side. Wearing a neck collar or head strap wouldn't be too thrilling, either. There are many gimmicks; some even work, because they keep the snorer awake.

Where is all that noise coming from?

The noise occurs when there is an obstruction to the free flow of air through the passages at the back of the mouth and nose. This may be caused by a number of different conditions:

- Excessive tissues of the throat. In children snoring is often due to large tonsils and adenoids. Cysts or tumors are rare, but can cause snoring.
- Excessive length of the soft palate and uvula (the fleshy tissue that dangles from the roof of the mouth). A long palate may narrow the opening from the nose into the throat. As it dangles in the airway, it acts as a flutter valve during relaxed breathing, and contributes to the noise of snoring.
- Obstructed nasal airways. If a blockage exists in the nose due to a cold, infection, or deformity of the nose, snoring can occur. Allergy is a common cause of snoring.
- Poor muscle tone in the muscles of the tongue and throat. Here the tongue falls backwards into the airway and obstructs the free flow of air in the throat.

Just how important is this, anyway?

That depends. If you are married to a serious snorer you may wish you had a permanent hearing loss. Snorers incur the wrath of fellow household members because they tend to disturb the peace. They can be unwelcome roommates on vacations.

In severe cases, snoring is more than just a noisy interference – it can cause what is known as obstructive sleep apnea. Here, loud snoring is interrupted by frequent episodes of totally obstructed breathing. If these last over 10 seconds each and occur more often than 7 times per hour then this is quite serious and deserves medical attention. The long term effects of this oxygen starvation may lead to elevated blood pressure and heart enlargement. Persons with obstructive sleep apnea may spend little of their night-time hours in restful sleep, and may find themselves constantly falling asleep during the daytime.

Can snoring be helped?

Trying some simple changes in lifestyle occasionally may help snoring. Persons who are overweight should lose weight. Alcoholic beverages, heavy meals, and tranquilizers should be avoided prior to bedtime. A large marble sewn into a pocket on a pajama back may prevent sleeping on the back, and thus reduce snoring.

More often, heavy snoring is effectively treated only after a proper diagnosis of the cause is made, beginning with a careful examination of the nose, mouth, and throat. Treatment may consist of medication, attention to allergies, or surgery to correct an obstruction to airflow such as huge tonsils and adenoids or a deformed nasal septum. Often a relatively simple and painless office procedure may provide permanent relief.

Fortunately, today most adults and children with snoring can be helped. And when the snoring is helped, often other symptoms, such as nasal congestion, hay fever, chronic sore throats, or chronic fatigue are helped as well.