

Snoring and obstructive sleep apnea

Snoring indicates that there is a partial obstruction to air moving through the nose and throat area during sleep. There are 5 possible causes which often co-exist:

1. Age – snoring is more common in men over the age of 40 years and women over the age of 50 years (particularly post-menopausal).
2. Nasal obstruction – such as tonsils and adenoids, nasal allergies and a deviated nasal septum can all interfere with air moving through the nose.
3. Tongue and jaw – during sleep the muscles holding the jaw in place relax allowing the jaw, and the tongue, to move backwards causing an obstruction. This factor is particularly important when lying on the back.
4. Soft palate – this structure is situated at the top of the mouth behind the teeth ending in the small tongue hanging down the back of the throat. The soft palate closes during swallowing to prevent food from going up the back of the nose. Vibration of the palate often causes the noise of snoring and the area behind the palate is often the narrowest part of the airway and thus most likely to close.
5. Weight around the neck area can cause narrowing of the whole airway.

Resolution of any of these factors may result in treatment of the snoring which is often considered to be noise pollution only. Snoring may, however, indicate a more serious problem and that is when the obstruction to airflow results in a collapse of the airway leading to a partial or a total blockage of air flow. Snoring stops for a few seconds and the obstruction often ends with a snort and movement described as restless sleep.

These arousals during the night lead to unrefreshing sleep and sleepiness during the day. Over the longer term the fragmented sleep and drops in oxygen can cause abnormal heart beats, high blood pressure or diabetes so it is important to find and treat. If mild enough the relief of any of the obstructions listed above may be enough. If too severe then the use of a nasal CPAP machine, that assists in holding the airway open using pressurised air, every night may be necessary.

If you are concerned that you may have obstructive sleep apnea please mention it to your doctor.