



Patient education: Sleep apnea in adults (The Basics)

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What is sleep apnea?

Sleep apnea is a condition that makes you stop breathing for short periods while you are asleep. There are 2 types of sleep apnea. One is called "obstructive sleep apnea." The other is called "central sleep apnea."

In obstructive sleep apnea, you stop breathing because your throat narrows or closes ([figure 1](#)). In central sleep apnea, you stop breathing because your brain does not send the right signals to your muscles to make you breathe. When people talk about sleep apnea, they are usually referring to **obstructive** sleep apnea, which is what this article is about.

People with sleep apnea do not know that they stop breathing when they are asleep. But they do sometimes wake up startled or gasping for breath. They also often hear from loved ones that they snore.

What are the symptoms of sleep apnea?

The main symptoms of sleep apnea are loud snoring, tiredness, and daytime sleepiness. Other symptoms can include:

- Restless sleep
- Waking up choking or gasping
- Morning headaches, dry mouth, or sore throat
- Waking up often to urinate
- Waking up feeling unrested or groggy
- Trouble thinking clearly or remembering things

Some people with sleep apnea don't have symptoms, or don't realize that they have them.

Should I see a doctor or nurse?

Yes. If you think that you might have sleep apnea, see your doctor.

Is there a test for sleep apnea?

Yes. First, your doctor or nurse will ask about your symptoms. If you have a bed partner, they might also ask that person if you snore or gasp in your sleep. If the doctor or nurse suspects that you have sleep apnea, they might send you for a "sleep study."

Sleep studies can sometimes be done at home, but they are usually done in a sleep lab. For the study, you spend the night in the lab, and you are hooked up to different machines that monitor your heart rate, breathing, and other body functions. The results of the test tell your doctor or nurse if you have the disorder.

Is there anything I can do on my own to help my sleep apnea?

Yes. Some things that might help:

- Try to avoid sleeping on your back, if possible. This might help some people.
- Lose weight, if you have excess body weight.
- Get regular physical activity. This might help you lose weight. But even if it doesn't, being active is good for your health.
- Avoid alcohol, especially in the evening. Alcohol can make sleep apnea worse.

How is sleep apnea treated?

Treatment can include:

- Weight loss – As mentioned above, weight loss can help if you have excess weight or obesity. But losing weight can be challenging, and it takes time to lose enough weight to help with your sleep apnea. Most people need other treatment while they work on losing weight.
- CPAP – The most effective treatment for sleep apnea is a device that keeps your airway open while you sleep. Treatment with this device is called "continuous positive airway pressure" ("CPAP"). People getting CPAP wear a face mask at night that keeps them breathing ([figure 2](#)).

If your doctor or nurse recommends a CPAP machine, be patient about using it. The mask might seem uncomfortable to wear at first, and the machine might seem noisy, but using the machine can really help you. People with sleep apnea who use a CPAP machine feel more rested and generally feel better.

If CPAP does not work, your doctor might suggest other treatment. Options might include:

- An oral device – This is a device that you wear in your mouth. It is called an "oral appliance" or "mandibular advancement device." It helps keep your airway open while you sleep.
- Hypoglossal nerve stimulation – This involves a procedure to implant a small device into your chest. The device has a wire that connects to the nerve under your tongue. While you are sleeping, it sends an electrical signal that causes the tongue to push forward. This helps open up your airway.
- Surgery to widen your airway – This might involve removing your tonsils or other tissue that blocks the airway.

Is sleep apnea dangerous?

It can be. Risks include:

- Accidents – People with sleep apnea do not get good-quality sleep, so they are often tired and not alert. This puts them at risk for car accidents and other types of accidents.
- Other health problems – Studies show that people with sleep apnea are more likely than others to have high blood pressure, heart attacks, and other serious heart problems. Some people also have mood changes or depression.

In people with severe sleep apnea, getting treated (for example, with CPAP) can help lower these risks.

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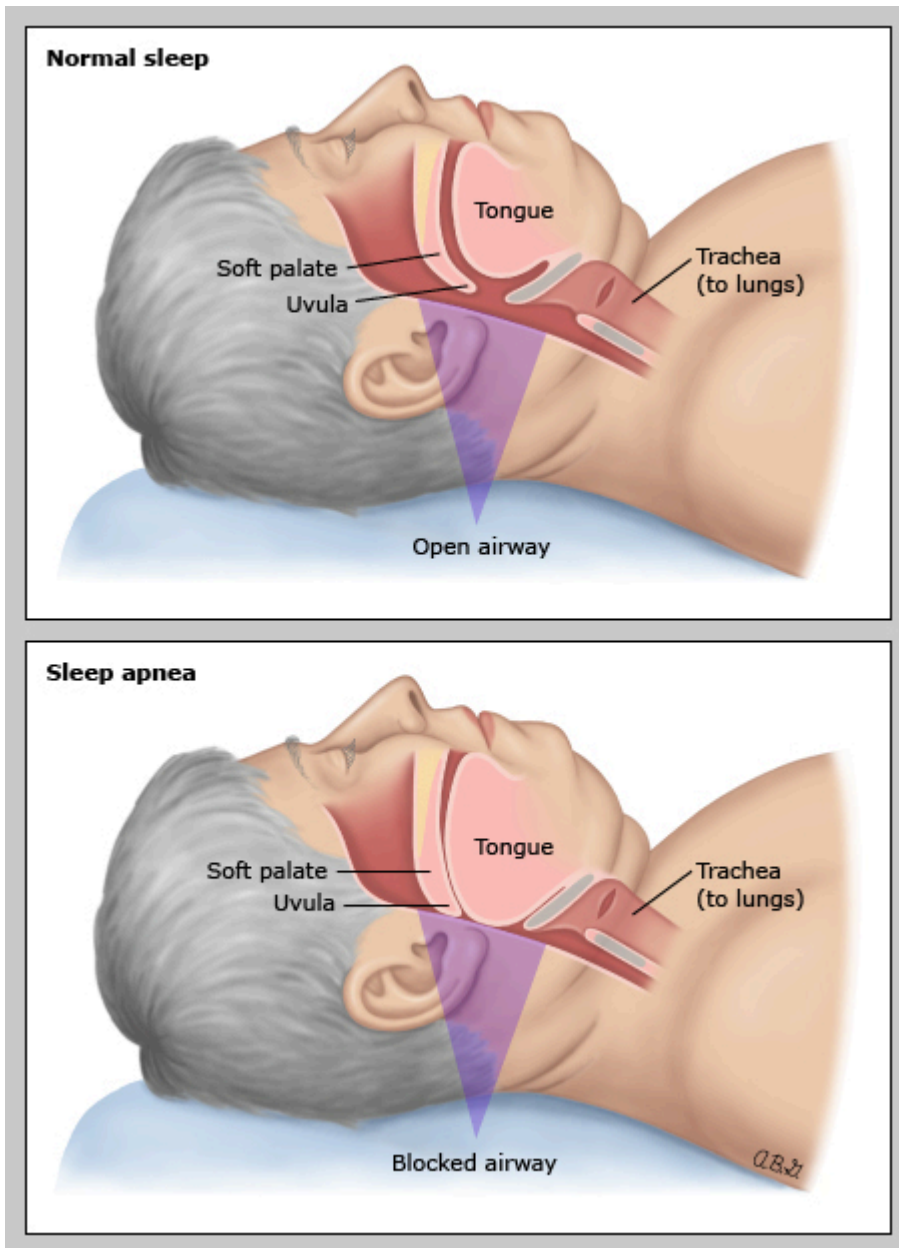
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GRAPHICS

Airway in a person with sleep apnea



Normally, when a person sleeps, the airway remains open, and air can pass from the nose and mouth to the lungs. In a person with sleep apnea, parts of the throat and mouth drop into the airway and block off the flow of air. This can cause loud snoring and interrupt breathing for short periods.

Graphic 75747 Version 6.0

Continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) for sleep apnea



The CPAP mask gently blows air into your nose while you sleep. It puts just enough pressure on your airway to keep it from closing. The mask in this picture fits over just the nose. Other CPAP devices have masks that fit over the nose and mouth.

Graphic 65324 Version 5.0

