

## When Snoring is a Problem

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NSW Multicultural Health Communication Service

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## When Snoring is a Problem

We all know what snoring sounds like. But some people - especially overweight men over the age of 40 - have a different kind of snore. Now and again the steady rhythm of their snoring is interrupted by a few seconds of silence, followed by a few extra loud snores.

The reason for this is that the person's tongue, as well as part of their throat, has become so relaxed during sleep that they block the airway, making it hard to breathe. The loud snores following the silence mean the person is waking up and struggling for breath.

Called sleep apnoea, the condition affects about twice as many men as women - doctors think that about nine per cent of men over 40 have sleep apnoea. For many of them it's severe enough to be a health problem. Although the person with sleep apnoea doesn't realise, he or she is waking up frequently during the night and not getting enough sleep. This can cause irritability and unusual drowsiness during the day - a serious problem for anyone who drives a car. Research in the US, for instance, has found that drivers with this condition cause more than twice as many road accidents as other drivers.

Doctors also believe that people with sleep apnoea are more likely to have high blood pressure and suffer a heart attack and stroke.

How do you know if you have sleep apnoea? That's the trouble - most people with this problem don't realise it. It's more likely to be the person's partner or someone in the same household who's more aware, not only of the snoring, but also of the drowsiness during the day.

But because snoring and drowsiness don't seem like important symptoms, many people don't bother to see their GP, says Professor Colin Sullivan of the Centre for Respiratory Failure and Sleep Disorders at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital.

"But it's not a trivial problem," he adds, "It should be taken seriously."

Why do people get sleep apnoea? It's more common among people who are overweight - obesity adds extra fat to the tongue and throat area, making it easier for the airway to become blocked. For some people, weight loss alone is enough to stop sleep apnoea.

Another problem is alcohol. When we sleep, the muscles in the body become more relaxed than when we're awake. Alcohol increases this effect by making the muscles even more relaxed. This makes it easier for the tongue to roll back into the throat and block the airway. But doctors also think that some people are simply born with smaller airways which are more easily obstructed.

Sleep apnoea can sometimes be treated by wearing a special mask over the nose at night which prevents the airway from becoming blocked.

Anyone who thinks they may have sleep apnoea - or whose partner thinks they have symptoms - should see a doctor who can refer them to a hospital sleep disorders clinic. It's important for the partner to see the doctor too - she or he can help describe the symptoms.

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.