



Patient education: Sleep apnea in adults (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

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," and 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 they don't know they have them. They might figure that it's normal to be tired or to snore a lot.

Should I see a doctor or nurse?

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

Is there a test for sleep apnea?

Yes. If your doctor or nurse suspects you have sleep apnea, he or she 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 will 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. Here are some things that might help:

- Stay off your back when sleeping. (This is not always practical, because people cannot control their position while asleep. Plus, it only helps some people.)
 - Lose weight, if you are overweight
 - Avoid alcohol, because it can make sleep apnea worse
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How is sleep apnea treated?

As mentioned above, weight loss can help if you are overweight or obese. 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.

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," or 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, try to 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 pay off. People with sleep apnea who use a CPAP machine feel more rested and generally feel better.

There is also another device that you wear in your mouth called an "oral appliance" or "mandibular advancement device." It also helps keep your airway open while you sleep. But devices do not work as well as CPAP for treating sleep apnea.

In rare cases, when nothing else helps, doctors recommend surgery to keep the airway open. Surgery to do this is not always effective, and even when it is, the problem can come back.

Is sleep apnea dangerous?

It can be. 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. Plus, studies show that people with sleep apnea are more likely than others to have high blood pressure, heart attacks, and other serious heart problems. In people with severe sleep apnea, getting treated (for example, with a CPAP machine) can help prevent some of these problems.

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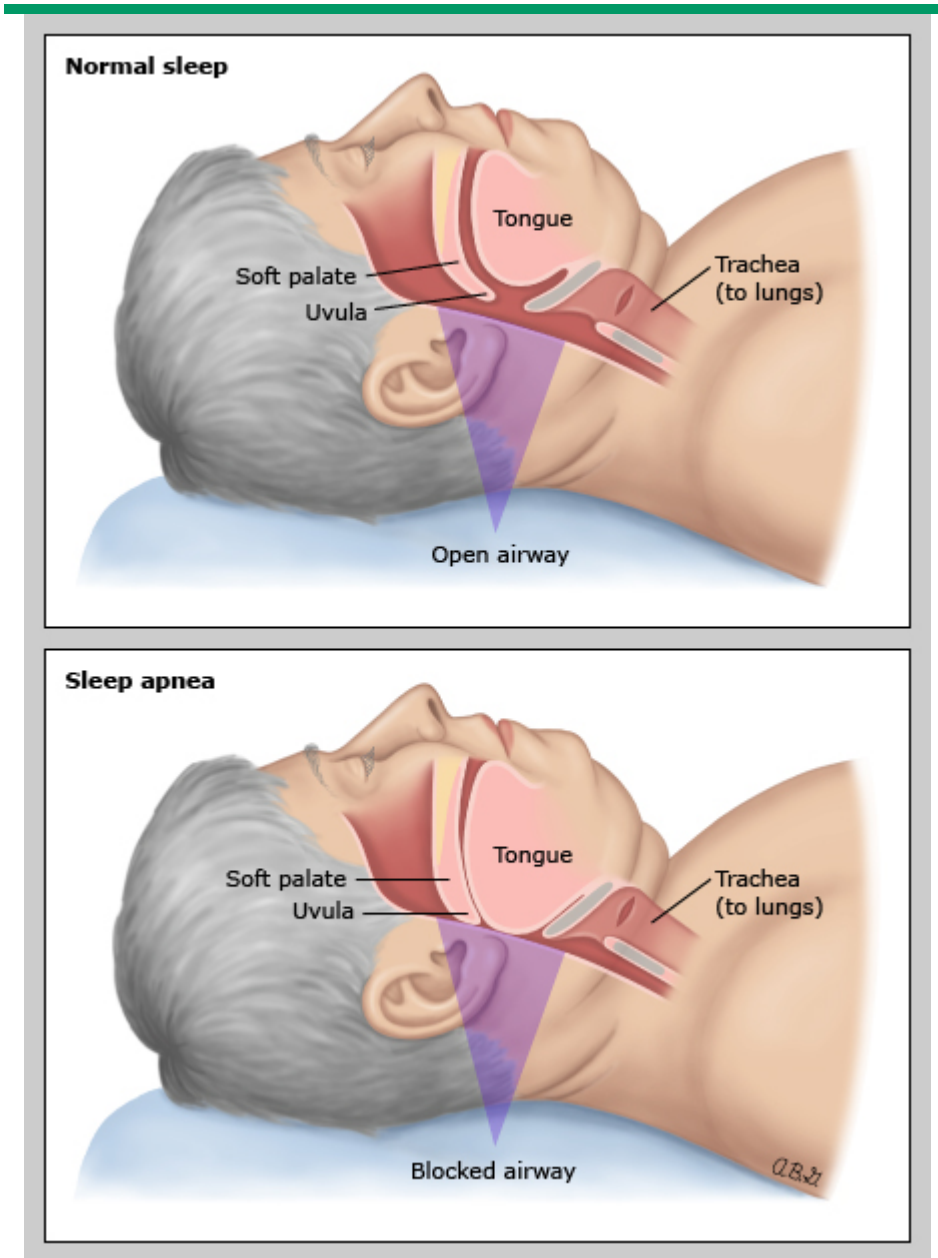
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GRAPHICS

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 5.0

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