

Sleep Apnea: Care Instructions

Your Care Instructions

Sleep apnea means that you frequently stop breathing for 10 seconds or longer during sleep. It can be mild to severe. This is based on the number of times an hour that you stop breathing or have slowed breathing.

Blocked or narrowed airways in your nose, mouth, or throat can cause sleep apnea. Your airway can become blocked when your throat muscles and tongue relax during sleep.

You can treat sleep apnea at home by making lifestyle changes. You also can use a CPAP breathing machine that keeps tissues in the throat from blocking your airway. Your doctor may also suggest that you use a breathing device while you sleep. It helps keep your airway open. This could be a device that you put in your mouth. Other examples include strips or disks that you use on your nose. In some cases, surgery may be needed to remove enlarged tissues in the throat.

Follow-up care is a key part of your treatment and safety. Be sure to make and go to all appointments, and call your doctor or nurse call line if you are having problems. It's also a good idea to know your test results and keep a list of the medicines you take.

How can you care for yourself at home?

- Lose weight, if needed. It may reduce the number of times you stop breathing or have slowed breathing. Sleep on your side. It may stop mild apnea. If you tend to roll onto your back, sew a pocket in the back of your pyjama top. Put a tennis ball into the pocket, and stitch the pocket shut. This will help keep you from sleeping on your back.
- Avoid alcohol and medicines such as sleeping pills and sedatives before bed. Do not smoke. Smoking can make sleep apnea worse. If you need help quitting, talk to your doctor about stop-smoking programs and medicines. These can increase your chances of quitting for good.
- Prop up the head of your bed 10 to 15 centimetres by putting bricks under the legs of the bed.
- Treat breathing problems, such as a stuffy nose, caused by a cold or allergies. Try a continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) breathing machine if your doctor recommends it. The machine keeps your airway open when you sleep.
- If CPAP does not work out for you, ask your doctor if you can try other breathing machines. A bilevel positive airway pressure machine uses one type of air pressure for breathing in and another type for breathing out. Another device raises or lowers air pressure as needed while you breathe.

Talk to your doctor if:

- Your nose feels dry or bleeds when using one of these machines. You may need to increase moisture in the air. A humidifier may help.
- Your nose is runny or stuffy from using a breathing machine. Decongestants or a corticosteroid nasal spray may help.
- You are sleepy during the day and it gets in the way of the normal things you do. Do not drive when you are drowsy.