

## Coping with Snoring and Sleep Apnoea

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Overcoming Common Problems

# Coping with Snoring and Sleep Apnoea

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JILL ECKERSLEY

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# 1

## Why snoring is no joke

Why did you pick up this book? Perhaps you're embarrassed because someone has just told you that you snore. Perhaps you are the long-suffering partner of a snorer and you're fed up with sleepless nights, and tired of decamping to the spare room or the living-room sofa at three in the morning. Perhaps you've had enough of the jokes – because snoring really isn't funny.

Accurate figures about the number of people affected by snoring are hard to come by, but it's certain that a large minority of the UK population, more than four in ten of us, has a snoring problem. Globally, it has been estimated that a staggering 763 million people snore. Chinese and Afro-Caribbean people are apparently hearty snorers. In some parts of the USA, snoring is grounds for divorce, and in 1997 it was reported that an Iranian gentleman had divorced his wife for snoring.

Snoring is a problem that doesn't just affect the snorer, but his partner and family too. I say 'his' partner because more men than women snore – about 10.4 million men in the UK as against 4.5 million women, according to the Surrey-based British Snoring and Sleep Apnoea Association (BSSAA).

Professor John Rees, Professor of Medical Education at Guy's Hospital, says that at the moment no one really knows why men are more likely to snore than women.

It may be related to neck size, men having larger necks in general. It may also partly relate to alcohol consumption. On top of this, the drive to respiration may generally be greater in women, especially pre-menopausal women, because of the respiratory stimulant effect of the female hormone progesterone.

By the age of 60 about half of all men are snorers, and research in Canada has discovered that post-menopausal women are, indeed, much more likely to snore than younger ones. This might suggest

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that there's a link to hormone function, with the female hormones oestrogen and progesterone having a protective effect. Another, and far simpler, reason why older women snore more is likely to be because, like older men, they tend to put on weight and lose muscle tone as they get older. The shape of women's airways is also a little different from men's. Women have slightly less flexible airway walls, which don't yield to pressure in the same way. However, the British Snoring and Sleep Apnoea Association does report that some older women among their members have found that being prescribed hormone replacement therapy has helped their snoring.

The fact that snoring is often much more of a problem for the listeners – partners, families and flatmates, even neighbours – than it is for the snorer can cause problems in itself. Doctors say this is one of the very few areas of medicine where they are actually treating a person in order to benefit others, rather than the person him- or herself. It is more difficult to motivate yourself to take the necessary steps to change your lifestyle, or get treatment for your snoring, if you are able to sleep sweetly through the night while your family suffer! Many snorers actually deny they have a problem, until presented with the evidence on tape. This has implications for family relationships and it's a shame to let it get to the stage where your partner is threatening to leave before you agree to do something about it. Some couples never get that far. While researching this book I came across a couple of young women who had flatly refused to move in with, or marry, the men in their lives until they had taken steps to sort out their snoring problem. I also spoke to innumerable women, and a few men, whose partners simply refused to admit that they snored, and some older people who were self-conscious about embarking on new relationships in later life because of their snoring problem.

It's embarrassing to be told you snore, just as it's embarrassing to be told you have halitosis or smelly feet. Snorers feel self-conscious and defensive about their habit, and relentless teasing from partners and flatmates is often counter-productive.

'People will mock those who snore, just as they mock anyone who falls asleep in public and laugh at politicians or public figures who make fools of themselves,' says psychologist Ken Gibbons.

‘Malicious humour is a very British characteristic. We like to bring people down, and although we often claim it isn’t done unkindly, the effect is still hurtful.’

As far as is known, snoring doesn’t run in families, although if you have inherited a short, fat neck or a particular airway anatomy from one of your parents, this may predispose you to be a snorer.

### Who snores?

Everyone snores sometimes, when they have a cold or blocked nose for some other reason. A snore happens when the air you breathe hits the floppy, soft tissues at the back of the throat, which are relaxed in sleep. This leads to the rhythmic rumbling, buzzing, snuffling or grunting noises which are all too familiar to snorers and their nearest and dearest. The average snorer produces about 60 decibels (dB). (As a comparison, a vacuum cleaner produces about 80 dB.) Until very recently the loudest snores on record were those measured by researchers at Orebro University in Sweden in 1993, reaching a staggering 93 dB, as loud as a heavy lorry or passing Tube train, and were credited, if that’s the right word, to a 44-year-old named Kare Walker. In the early summer of 2002, however, a Nottinghamshire man was said to have produced snores which hit 102 dB, roughly the same volume as an accelerating motorbike.

Ancient records reveal that some of the Roman emperors were snorers, as was Beau Brummel, the Regency dandy. In the heyday of the Wild West, it is said that legendary gunfighter John Wesley Harding became so enraged by the loud snoring of a fellow hotel guest that he shot through the wall of his room and killed him! And this isn’t the only time snoring has led to murder. In 1993, Texas police arrested a woman who had shot her lover for snoring too loudly. An American truck driver, travelling to Las Vegas by bus to pick up his next rig, fell asleep on the bus and snored so loudly that the driver had to wake him up because he was disturbing the other passengers. Unfortunately he fell asleep again and had to be woken several times by the exasperated bus driver. Eventually he was hauled off the bus in handcuffs by the police and charged with disturbing the peace – the punishment being a \$500 fine or six months in jail.

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The dangerous form of snoring, known as ‘sleep apnoea’, in which the subject actually stops breathing (see Chapter 3), was certainly known in the days of Charles Dickens. He describes a classic case in the overweight messenger-boy Joe in *The Pickwick Papers*, written in 1837. Joe, described as a wonderfully fat boy who snores and breathes heavily, is advised by his master to keep knocking at the door until someone answers, in case he should fall asleep in mid-knock! Snoring, breathing heavily and falling asleep during the daytime are all symptoms of sleep apnoea.

Distinguished snorers down the years have included Winston Churchill, who is said to have snored so loudly during the war years that his staff couldn’t hear the bombs dropping on London. Mussolini was also a snorer, as were at least 20 US presidents. When President Theodore Roosevelt was hospitalized, almost every other patient on the wing complained about his snoring. When actress Joanne Woodward was asked what it was like to be married to her sex symbol husband, the late Paul Newman, she replied, ‘He has six children and he snores. How can he be a sex symbol?’ Elizabeth Taylor is also reputed to be a snorer, as are David Arquette, husband of *Friends* actress Courtenay Cox, Roseanne Barr, film director Guy Ritchie (the ex-Mr Madonna) and *I’m a Celebrity* contestant David Gest. Not to mention Billy Connolly, who is said to have sleep apnoea.

### Living with a snorer

But you probably don’t care about Beau Brummel . . . or Churchill . . . or even Billy Connolly. All you want is a cure – and a decent night’s sleep – before you’re tempted to strangle the snorer in your life.

Here’s Pauline, who has been married to a snorer for 18 years:

David has always snored on and off, but he has put on a bit of weight in the past year and the last six months have been a nightmare for both of us.

It’s like the Chinese water torture, because even when he isn’t snoring I can’t relax enough to drop off because I am just waiting for him to start up. When he does it’s so loud, it’s like being in the middle of Grand Central Station or a farmyard. No one could be expected to sleep through it.

His snoring disturbs us both because I usually nudge him awake in the hope that changing positions will shut him up. Sometimes it does for a while . . . and then it starts again. Sometimes he kind of chokes and gasps and wakes himself up.

Like a lot of men, he hasn't yet been willing to go to our GP about it. I think he's afraid the doctor will suggest surgery. But we can't go on like this. He has tried those nasal strips that athletes wear and he did get a better night's sleep for a time. He does suffer from a stuffed-up nose and the strips seemed to keep his airway clear, but they didn't cure the noise, not really. Then I saw a dental device advertised in my local dental surgery. We splashed out over £200 on that and it didn't help much. We did have a couple of undisturbed nights but that might have been because we were both so exhausted. David said it was difficult to get used to having the device in his mouth, as well.

The most serious problem it has caused is that we are both permanently exhausted. David has a long commute to work so he really needs quality sleep. I worry about him driving when he is so tired.

I work from home, but I need my sleep as well. I've lost count of the times I've had to sleep on a fold-up bed in the study just to get away from David's snoring. It has really become an issue between us and is affecting our relationship.

And Judy, teenage daughter of another snorer:

It's embarrassing. I can't ever bring my friends home on Sundays because Dad likes to have a snooze after Sunday lunch – and believe me, you can hear him all down the street, especially in the summer when the windows are open.

When we were little we used to stay in a caravan for our holidays and it was awful, Dad kept us all awake.

Terry was quoted in a newsletter of the British Snoring and Sleep Apnoea Association:

When I went camping with my family, I knew I'd have to sleep in a separate tent a few feet away from my wife and children or they would never get to sleep. But I was amazed and horrified when I found a note pinned to my tent by other guests on the camping site asking me if I would mind leaving because my snoring was keeping them all awake.

Other members complain of not being able to go on holiday because the noise of snoring travels through thin holiday hotel room walls and reverberates around self-catering apartments or campsites.

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Many are too embarrassed to go away to stay with friends or invite them to stay for a weekend.

‘Holidays are a huge problem for snorers and their families,’ comments Marianne Davey of the BSSAA.

At least when they are at home, partners can escape to the sofa or, if they’re lucky, the spare room. Few people have the resources to be able to afford separate rooms on holiday. We always advise snorers to contact us three months before they plan to go away so that we can offer them some solutions in plenty of time!

Liz has been a victim of snoring for most of her life. ‘I’ve heard all the jokes but, believe me, it isn’t funny,’ she says.

My parents were both really bad snorers and slept separately for years. It made them very irritable with each other and divorce was threatened at least three times, though they did stay together in the end.

I never thought that I would marry a snorer, but my husband has put on a lot of weight in the years we’ve been together and I now have to wear earplugs because of his snoring. Luckily I only work part-time. If I had a demanding full-time job and children to look after, it would kill me.

My husband is a typical man in that he would really rather ignore health problems and becomes defensive if I mention his snoring. I have to pick my moment or he just refuses to discuss it. He has tried most of the over-the-counter so-called ‘cures’ but they were useless. When I finally persuaded him to go to the doctor, he was told there was nothing that could be done for him. I’m sure that can’t be right.

We used to live in a one-bed flat and I spent most of my time sleeping on the sofa. It did nothing for our love life – in fact we didn’t have one. But we have recently moved to a three-bedroom house which we deliberately chose so that we could have separate rooms if we wanted. I’m also hoping that our new GP will be more up to date about what can be done. I’ve heard there’s an operation you can have.

At the moment I am trying to help my husband to lose weight and take more exercise, maybe join a gym, but I have to pick my moment to suggest anything like that.

Alan’s marriage actually broke up as a direct result of his snoring problem. ‘My wife couldn’t stand it any more,’ he admits.

I was turning into a slob, a complete couch potato. I was always so tired that as soon as I sat down after dinner I fell asleep. It was like being



permanently jet-lagged. I had no energy or desire to do anything, even things I used to enjoy, like gardening. I did try to lose weight and managed to shed a couple of stone, but it wasn't easy as I was going out for business lunches and then coming home to a nice meal in the evening. When you feel as lethargic as I did, exercise is the last thing you feel like doing.

After my marriage broke up my GP sent me for a 'sleep study' and I was diagnosed with sleep apnoea, the most serious form of snoring. I was told that while I was asleep I actually stopped breathing about eighty times a hour, and if I didn't do something about it I had about a 50 per cent chance of dying of asphyxiation. Sadly, it was too late to save my marriage, but at least my life is no longer at risk.

## Snoring and health

Snoring isn't an illness, but it is a symptom – of anything from the common cold to a more serious respiratory problem. Snorers seem generally to be less healthy than non-snorers. Research suggests that snorers have a higher than average risk of developing high blood pressure, heart attacks or stroke illness. A study conducted at the University of Buffalo, New York, found that people who experience disturbed sleep patterns are twice as likely to suffer strokes as those who sleep straight through the night. Another study of about 500 70-year-olds in Denmark found that

- blood pressure was about 15 per cent higher in snorers than it was in people who didn't snore;
- 11 per cent of the snorers suffered from angina, compared with only 5 per cent of the non-snorers;
- 15 per cent of the snorers had symptoms of arterial disease in their legs, compared with only 6 per cent of the non-snorers.

These results were adjusted for factors like body weight and smoking. According to Professor Rees of Guy's Hospital, researchers over the last few years have been trying to discover whether snorers are at risk of high blood pressure, heart attacks and strokes because they are snorers, or because they also tend to be overweight smokers and drinkers, all risk factors for these conditions. About 10 per cent of snorers go on to develop the potentially fatal condition called 'obstructive sleep apnoea' – for more about this, see Chapter 3.

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‘There is now good evidence that obstructive sleep apnoea and possibly even snoring itself are related to high blood pressure, heart attacks and strokes independently of the association with weight, smoking and drinking,’ he says. ‘The risk of these problems for snorers is not huge, but seems definitely to exist.’

The most obvious health problems caused by snoring are those associated with fatigue, which include anxiety, irritability, and poor memory and concentration. These, in their turn, can lead to problems at work and at home. No one is at their most efficient when they are chronically exhausted, and that means lower productivity as well as real danger for anyone whose job depends on alertness, from doctors to drivers. It’s estimated that about 10 per cent of car crashes are caused by tired drivers. Daytime sleepiness obviously affects people’s ability to do their job properly, and in the evening they are usually too tired to take a normal part in family and social life, preferring to nod off in front of the TV.

Lack of sleep also affects emotional health. Tired people are not happy people, and sleeplessness can turn a normally loving partner or concerned parent into a bad-tempered grouch with no time or sympathy for friends or family.

There is no one-size-fits-all, guaranteed cure for snoring, no ‘magic bullet’ that will suddenly turn a snorer into a silent sleeping partner! But there are treatments, and there are ways of managing the condition. Some just involve simple lifestyle changes, while others are more complex. There is no need to despair, however long you have suffered, because help is available, both for snorers and for their partners.

The Surrey-based British Snoring and Sleep Apnoea Association was set up in 1991 as a self-help group for snorers and their families. Founder and director Marianne Davey says,

Thirty years ago there seemed to be no research at all in this country, though America was about ten years ahead. If you went to your GP with the problem you would probably just be told you had to put up with it. Recently there has been an explosion of interest from doctors, dentists and maxillofacial consultants. GPs still get no training in the subject, although some have a particular interest. Many will refer you to your local ear, nose and throat (ENT) department. In good health authorities,

though, ENT, chest clinics and maxillofacial departments all work together. Once you know the cause of your snoring you can be referred for the most appropriate treatment.

### Is there a typical snorer?

Can you spot a snorer? He is most likely to be male, middle-aged or older, and overweight, but, confusingly, he may be none of those things. Younger people and even some children snore too.

'I always thought of snorers as sad, fat gits,' says Melanie, whose thirty-something boyfriend was acutely embarrassed when she told him he snored.

But Peter isn't like that at all – he's fit, good-looking, goes to the gym, but still he snores. We have a good relationship and have been together for eight years but snoring is a bit of a taboo subject for us. It affects things like going on holiday. I need my sleep, but it's really difficult to raise the topic of having separate rooms in our holiday hotel – not to mention the expense.

American researchers have reported that people whose heads are round rather than narrow are at greater risk of snoring. They looked at 60 snorers and 60 non-snorers and compared head shapes using X-rays.

'As the head gets relatively wider, the airway becomes relatively narrower, front to back,' says Dr Mark Hans, Chair of Orthodontics at Case Western Reserve School of Dentistry.

The shape of your head or jaw, the thickness of your neck, the size of your tonsils, adenoids and uvula (the flap of skin at the back of your throat) can all influence whether you snore or not (see Figure 1 overleaf). These aren't things you would necessarily be aware of, or be able to do anything about, any more than you can help your age or your sex. You might be aware of a nasal obstruction, although without sophisticated medical tests it would be hard to work out exactly where it was. You might also know you had a particularly short lower jaw. However, there are plenty of other factors you *can* do something about, like being overweight, smoking and drinking. Snoring is just as much a lifestyle issue as it is a medical one. Even if you decide to enlist the help of your doctor and experts like the BSSAA, you'll almost certainly have to

