

ASK the Pharmacist



Q:

My spouse says I snore and it's starting to wear her out. What can I do about it?

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A:

Snoring is essentially noisy breathing while sleeping. It is incredibly common with a recent study estimating that it affects about 90 million American adults, 37 million of those on a regular basis. While snorers are often the brunt of jokes, the facts are that snoring is really no laughing matter. As noted in the question above, it can be a major source of marital conflict, can lead to poor daytime functioning (for both partners) and if it's a sign of sleep apnea (which it is in 50-75% of those who snore) then it can lead to heart disease or early onset cognitive decline. People most at risk of snoring are those that are overweight, males, those with anatomical abnormalities in the nose and throat (such as a deviated septum, nasal polyps, enlarged adenoids or tonsils), people with allergies or infections of the nose and throat and the elderly (it is estimated that snoring rates in those over the age of 65 approaches 45% in males and 30% of all females). To understand how best to treat snoring it is worthwhile to gain an understanding of the biomechanics that lie behind it. When you sleep, the muscles in your throat relax causing the airway within the throat to be narrowed. At the same time, your tongue relaxes as well causing it to fall back and partially into the opening of the throat. Anytime you breathe, the walls of the throat vibrate, particularly when you breathe in. The narrower the airway, the greater the vibration and if the vibrations get intense enough, an audible noise is produced. It is these vibrations which are the source of the noise we refer to as snoring. If the walls of the throat collapse completely, the airway can become completely blocked off creating the conditions for apnea (which is defined as a cessation of breathing). Possible indicators that your snoring may in fact be sleep apnea are excessive daytime sedation, morning headaches, recent weight gain, awakening at night feeling confused, changes in your level of memory or concentration and pauses in your breathing while you are asleep. If you suspect apnea, you need to see a doctor and a night spent at a sleep clinic may well be in order. The first step in treating simple snoring is lifestyle modifications. Losing weight can be massively helpful as fatty tissue around the neck can exacerbate the narrowing that occurs at night. Alcohol is actually a potent muscle relaxer and therefore its consumption should be kept to a minimum as well. Muscle relaxants can also cause or worsen snoring for obvious reasons. Meals within 3 hours of an intended sleep can also worsen the situation. Lastly, sleep positioning retraining can be helpful as those who sleep on their back tend to snore more than those who are side-sleepers. This retraining can be engaged in a number of ways; two of the most common are sewing tennis balls onto the back of a night-shirt or the use of a full length body pillow which prevents the user from rolling onto their back. There are also a number of appliances that may prove useful including nasal dilators (Breathe Right strips are one such example) or an oral mouth guard which can be constructed by a dentist experienced in the treatment of snoring. As a last resort, you may undergo a surgical procedure on the back of the throat and roof of the mouth. Regardless of the treatment used, finding some way to minimize your snoring can potentially reenergize both you and your marriage and is most definitely worth a visit to your physician, sooner rather than later. For more information about this or any other health related questions, contact the pharmacists at Gordon Pharmasave, Your Health and Wellness Destination.