

HOW TO STOP SNORING

It disturbs sleep, affects your health and drives a long-suffering partner insane, but it is possible to make a change. **Louise Atkinson** finds out the secrets to a quiet night's rest

for nearly 30 years, my husband, Jonathan, and I have happily shared a marital bed, and with the kids (finally) leaving home, we should be getting the best sleep of our lives.

But we're not. There's a noisy interloper between our crisp cotton sheets - the sonorous rumble and snort of heavy snoring. From both of us. It's infuriating. We aren't particularly overweight, we're healthy and fit, but the nightly wheezes, grunts and honks have become ridiculous. We race to be the first to hit the pillow every evening because whichever one of us drops off to sleep first wins, leaving the other with no choice but to lie there and endure the cacophony. And I know we're not alone. Our friends moan about their partners, and there's a lot of dinner party chatter about the slippery slide of having to sleep in separate rooms.

According to the British Snoring & Sleep Apnoea Association, we are part of a 15 million strong band of UK snorers. Snoring occurs when the walls of the throat or nose relax and narrow as we sleep, partially blocking the airways. The sound is usually caused by vibrations of the tongue, nose, upper palate and throat.

More snorers are men (the ratio of male to female

'With snoring problems, my advice is always to change the things you can control'

is 2.3 to 1), but at midlife it seems women start to catch up fast as the hormonal changes that happen at perimenopause conspire to cripple a good night's sleep.

According to Dr Guy Meadows, author of *The Sleep Book: How to Sleep Well Every Night* (Orion, £8.99) and co-founder of The Sleep School (sleepschool.org), 56% of women going through the menopause report sleeping difficulties, and snoring can be triggered or worsened by several factors. Falling levels of the hormone progesterone, hormonally induced weight gain, a regular wine-drinking habit, greater levels of fatigue (extreme tiredness means you spend longer in deep non-REM sleep, which is associated with muscle relaxation) and medication all play a part, he says.

A grumpy bed partner is bad enough, but new research has also found that if your snoring is restricting your intake of oxygen (a condition called 'obstructive sleep apnoea') it could be putting your health at risk. Recent studies have found sleep apnoea-induced snoring can cause significant declines in brain function, plus its impact on heart health and blood pressure could leave you twice as likely to suffer a stroke.

Thankfully, Guy is swift to reassure that snoring only triggers health problems in extreme cases. His

advice, if you're worried, is to keep a sleep diary for three months, monitoring your sleep and your energy during the day, then take it along and discuss with your GP.

If things are deemed bad enough you might be referred to a sleep clinic for tests and then offered a CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) machine which sits under your bed, pumping air into your nose through a flexible tube strapped to your face. It seems like a nuclear option, and one which would be even more of a passion killer than the odd night in separate rooms. Surgery is only offered as a last resort on the NHS, as results are unpredictable. So, is there anything else that might work?

TIDY UP YOUR LIFESTYLE

'When a patient comes to me with snoring problems, my first advice is to change the things you *can* control,' says Jonathan Joseph, a consultant ear, nose and throat surgeon at hospitals including The London Clinic. 'Losing weight can really make a difference, especially if you can reduce fat around your neck, as can minimising stress, exercising regularly and trying to remember to sleep on your side.'

DRINK LESS

Alcohol tends to relax the muscles that hold the

airway open, leading to sagging tissues that vibrate while you sleep, so drinking less, and avoiding drinking close to bedtime, can help. Smoking and vaping both cause inflammation of the tissue in the upper airways, so quitting those can help, too. Guy also recommends checking the possible side effects of any medication you might be taking, because any that make you sleepy could be exacerbating your snoring.

TRY NASAL REMEDIES

If you suffer from allergies, you might have a stuffy nose, or if you sleep with your mouth open, yours could be a nasal issue. Jonathan recommends nasal strips and dilators (such as Breathe Right Congestion Relief Nasal Strips; £14 for 30, sainsburys.co.uk). He warns against using over-the-counter decongestants for more than a few days, and suggests trying saltwater rinses instead (available from chemists) to help clean the nose from irritants and allergens.

USE A MOUTHGUARD

For many snorers, the problem is caused by excessive vibration at the base of the tongue, and a mouthguard called a 'mandibular advancement device' can help. This looks like a gumshield, but it is engineered to bring the lower jaw forwards slightly, opening up the throat when you sleep. 'These devices can be very effective,' says Jonathan, 'but it's best if they are made to measure by a dentist who can get the balance right without causing pain in your jaw.' He suggests trying an off-the-shelf device first (from £30 to £200 at britishsnoring.co.uk) and if it works, investing in a more permanent solution from the dentist.

TRY THROAT EXERCISES

For people with mild snoring, research has shown that mouth and throat exercises can tone muscles around the airways. Try the exercises at sleepfoundation.org. Singing can also strengthen the throat muscles, as can playing a brass or woodwind instrument.

IF ALL ELSE FAILS...

Guy recommends trying acceptance and commitment therapy. 'Quite often in a relationship one person's snoring isn't as much of an issue as the mental chaos that accompanies the noise - the stress response triggered by thinking "This is *so annoying!*"' Acceptance means greeting your partner with a loving 'Hello!' instead of muttering, "You snored *all night!*" and, Guy says, accepting that it is perfectly okay to go to bed together, then moving to separate rooms to happily snore in peace. ■

What kind of

snorer are you?

Nasal or throat? Take the (free) online quiz at britishsnoring.co.uk to work out whether your problem arises from a blocked nose or collapsing nasal passages, or your tongue relaxing back in your throat as you sleep. The result can point you in the direction of gadgets most likely to help.

Take the obstructive sleep apnoea test. Simply answer yes or no to the following questions. If you score five or more, you could be at risk, so do discuss with your GP:

- Do you snore loudly enough to be heard through closed doors?
- Are you often tired or sleepy during the daytime?
- Has anyone observed you stop breathing during your sleep?
- Do you have or are you being treated for high blood pressure?
- Is your body mass index (BMI) more than 35?
- Are you aged over 50?
- Is your neck circumference greater than 40cm (16in)?
- Are you male?