

# Sleep Apnea: A Simpler Solution

By Dr. Derek Conte

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Joe is an overweight but athletic 50-year-old who has suffered from heavy snoring and sleep apnea for 12 years. He has a major problem with hip pain, has developed a limp, and is worried he will need a hip replacement before long. No matter how many hours of sleep he gets, he never feels rested upon waking. Joe had not been dreaming in all of this time, suggesting he was not entering the vital deep sleep phase.

Sleep apnea is a condition in which one stops breathing for seconds or even longer while they sleep. Sleep apnea is a serious condition and very insidious because one is often not aware of it. There are Three types of sleep apnea: 1) Central sleep apnea, accounting for 1% of cases, is caused by faulty breathing signals from the brainstem and, 2) Obstructive sleep apnea, 85% of cases, where the back of the throat collapses, preventing the free flow of air into the lungs and, 3) Mixed sleep apnea, 14% of cases. Apnea interrupts the sleep cycle many times each night and prevents the organs, including the brain, from getting enough oxygen. Apnea puts a strain on the heart and, in severe cases, can result in brain damage and even sudden death.

Joe's girlfriend contemplated sleeping in another room due to his snoring. She told him she was very frightened by his long episodes of not breathing and fitful sleep. She said it was like watching someone struggling in a fight all night. Joe was worried his snoring would drive his girlfriend away. Since he cared so much about her, he resolved to do something, even if it involved surgery to his throat. Another non-surgical option was the C-PAP machine, but that was expensive and very uncomfortable to wear all night. First he tried a nasal insert to open the nasal passage. This helped his breathing but did not stop the snoring or the apnea. Finally, he tried a mouthpiece that formed to his teeth and forced his lower jaw forward, opening the airway in the back of his throat. It cost him \$29 (NOTE: I have spoken to a specialist who fits people with a variety of sleep apnea devices. He indicated that these mouthpieces are indeed useful for people with "obstructive" sleep apnea. These mouthpieces are not appropriate for "central" sleep apnea. A proper medical evaluation is essential for correct treatment).

The morning after the very first night, Joe's girlfriend was still there. She told him he slept like a baby, undisturbed, and so quiet she thought he wasn't breathing at all; and he never missed a breath. After 2 weeks, Joe realized he was waking up feeling really rested for the first time in years. He also noticed that he was dreaming every night --- good dreams; vivid dreams. After another week he noticed there was much less pain in his hip, his muscles were looser and he wasn't limping nearly as much, and sometimes not at all. Is it possible that by quieting the apnea Joe was experiencing all levels of sleep, including that level in which growth and tissue repair take place and reduced his pain due to inflammation? I think so. Sleep apnea is a serious medical condition and should be evaluated properly, but it seems possible that a solution, for some, might not be so hard to come by.

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