Snoring

Forty-five percent of normal adults snore at least occasionally, and 25 percent are habitual snorers. Problem snoring is more frequent in males and overweight people, and it usually grows worse with age.

The noisy sounds of snoring occur when there is an obstruction to the free flow of air through the passages at the back of the mouth and nose. This area is the collapsible part of the airway where the tongue and upper throat meet the soft palate and uvula. Snoring occurs when these structures strike each other and vibrate during breathing.

People who snore may suffer from:
- Poor muscle tone in the nose and throat. When muscles are too relaxed, either from alcohol or drugs that cause sleepiness, the tongue falls backwards into the airway or the throat muscles draw in from the sides into the airway. This can also happen during deep sleep.
- Excessive bulkiness of throat tissue. Children with large tonsils and adenoids often snore. Overweight people have bulky neck tissue, too. Cysts or tumors can also cause bulk, but they are rare.
- Long soft palate and/or uvula. A long palate narrows the opening from the nose into the throat. As it dangles, it acts as a noisy flutter valve during relaxed breathing. A long uvula makes matters worse.
- Obstructed nasal airways. A stuffy or blocked nose requires extra effort to pull air through it. This creates an exaggerated vacuum in the throat and pulls together the floppy tissues of the throat, resulting in snoring. Snoring of this type often occurs only during the hay fever season or with a cold or sinus infection.
- Deformities of the nose or nasal septum, such as a deviated septum (a deformity of the wall that separates one nostril from the other) can cause one to snore.

Is snoring serious?

Socially, yes! It can be, when it makes the snorer the object of ridicule and causes others sleepless nights and resentfulness.

Medically, yes! It disturbs sleeping patterns and deprives the snorer of appropriate rest. When snoring is severe, it can cause serious, long-term health problems, including obstructive sleep apnea.

What is Obstructive Sleep Apnea?

When loud snoring is interrupted by frequent episodes of totally obstructed breathing, it is known as obstructive sleep apnea. Serious episodes last more than ten seconds each and occur more than seven times per hour. Apnea patients may experience 30 to
300 such events per night. These episodes can reduce blood oxygen levels, causing the heart to pump harder.

The immediate effect of sleep apnea is that the snorer must sleep lightly and keep his muscles tense in order to keep airflow to the lungs. Because the snorer does not get a good rest, he may be sleepy during the day, which impairs job performance and makes him a hazardous driver or equipment operator. After many years with this disorder, elevated blood pressure and heart enlargement may occur.

**Can heavy snoring be cured?**

Heavy snorers, those who snore in any position and are disruptive to the family, should seek medical advice to ensure that sleep apnea is not a problem. An otolaryngologist will provide a thorough examination of the nose, mouth, throat, palate and neck. A sleep study in a laboratory environment may be necessary to determine how serious the snoring is and what effects it has on a snorer's health.

**How is snoring treated?**

Treatment depends on the diagnosis. An examination will reveal if the snoring is caused by nasal allergy, infection, deformity, tonsils or adenoids.

Snoring or obstructive sleep apnea may respond to various treatments now offered by many otolaryngologist/head and neck surgeons. If surgery is too risky or unwanted, the patient may sleep every night with a nasal mask that delivers air pressure into the throat; this is called continuous positive airway pressure, or CPAP.

A chronically snoring child should be examined for problems with his or her tonsils and adenoids. A tonsillectomy and adenoidectomy may be required to return the child to full health.

**Self Help for the Light Snorer**

Adults who suffer from mild or occasional snoring should try self-help remedies:

- Adopt a healthy and athletic lifestyle to develop good muscle tone and lose weight
- Avoid tranquilizers, sleeping pills and antihistamines before bedtime
- Avoid alcohol for at least four hours and heavy meals or snacks for three hours before bed
- Establish regular sleeping patterns
- Sleep on your side
- Tilt the head of your bed upwards by four inches