

Snoring? The spare room is not the only answer!

Snoring is a common problem which not only keeps your partner awake and just short of hitting you over the head, but can also be a serious health issue. It can result in disturbed sleep as you get thumped, woken and told to roll over frequently throughout the night. You might suffer daytime drowsiness, morning headaches or constant throat clearing and nose blowing to clear congestion which has built up overnight. There may be some difficulty with memory or concentration at work (or school- children snore too), it might extend to anxiety or depression, even nightmares and sexual dysfunction. And if it is really bad there may be nocturnal choking episodes and finally apnoea, a term used to describe a pause in breathing of 10 seconds or more.

Snoring is indicative of someone who is over-breathing in their sleep, breathing a greater volume of air per minute at a rate and depth of breathing which is too much for the body's needs at the time. Called hyperventilation, it lowers carbon dioxide levels which disturbs the body's chemistry and reduces oxygen delivery to all body tissues. Associated symptoms can include chest pains, arrhythmia, fast heart rate, high blood pressure, anxiety, sweating, impaired concentration, tremors, restless sleep, frightening dreams, dizziness, headache, breathlessness, bronchospasm, belching and fatigue. The excessive breathing leads to the overproduction of mucous, dehydration, chronic enlargement of the tonsils and adenoids and the development of nasal polyps.

Normal breathing during sleep and when awake is quiet, light, regular and nasal. Anything more is hyperventilation. Most people are aware of the acute hyperventilation that occurs when someone is having a panic attack but few are aware that hyperventilation can be chronic - less severe in appearance but more damaging because it can go on for years unnoticed and undiagnosed. Hyperventilation is not just present when asleep.

Snoring is gross hyperventilation and it can become apnoea. Heavy breathing and snoring are associated with a drop in airway carbon dioxide levels. If the carbon dioxide concentration goes below a critical level, the "apnoeic threshold", apnoea can occur, with insufficient carbon dioxide to stimulate breathing it stops temporarily to correct this imbalance in blood gases. Collapsing of the airway occurs in some instances. These processes allow the carbon dioxide to return to a higher level initiating breathing usually with a snort, sigh, or sharp intake of air.

There are several solutions to this problem, some like CPAP and dental appliances work while they are being worn but they do not correct the underlying problem, they do not correct the dysfunctional breathing. Surgery is an option but from all accounts it is quite painful, very unpleasant and whilst the nose is packed one is forced to breathe entirely through the mouth.

This is not optimal as mouth breathing is very definitely over breathing, so once again this does not correct the dysfunctional breathing problem.

Another solution is to retrain the breathing, to reset the automatic respiratory drive to the correct rate, thereby reducing the breathing volume. The Buteyko breathing method aims to do just this. It addresses the hyperventilation that can cause the snoring and the apnoea and thus corrects the dysfunctional breathing problem.

Snoring, annoying as it is, is but one symptom in a collection of symptoms known as sleep disordered breathing, it might be annoying to you but to the person concerned it could be a sign that all is not well in their life.

So if you have been banished to the spare room for your noisy breathing or snoring or your bed partner is at risk of becoming a guest in the house then consider corrective breathing training to return the breathing to normal, to the quiet, gentle nasal breathing it was before the breathing became a loud snore and before the snoring becomes an issue.