Health Tip: Snoring, nuisance or medical concern?
Part 1: Benign Snoring

It's estimated that snoring affects up to half of the US population at one time or another. Snoring occurs when there is blockage to the flow of air through the passages at the back of the mouth and nose. This causes the tissues to vibrate when breathing, creating the distinctive sound of "sawing logs". Many people are aware that snoring can be a feature of a serious medical condition known as obstructive sleep apnea.

Most commonly, however, it is just an annoying consequence of being overweight, consuming too much alcohol prior to bedtime, or to certain anatomical features such as an elongated soft palate (uvula), deviated nasal septum or enlarged tonsils. Even at that, snoring does have important social and medical ramifications. It can cause bed partners to lose sleep and make the snorer an object of ridicule, as well as disturbing the quality of sleep of the snorer. Fortunately, there are several treatment options available that will help with snoring.

Self-help measures for snoring. Lifestyle measures and "home remedies" for snoring include:

- **Losing weight, if needed.** Being overweight causes extra bulkiness in the throat. This narrows the airway and causes the loose throat tissues to vibrate. Losing as few as 10 pounds can bring about improvement.

- **Sleeping on your side rather than your back.** When lying on your back, the tongue falls backward into the throat, partially blocking the air passage. One way to encourage someone to stay off of their back while sleeping is to sew a tennis ball into the back their pajama top.

- **Limiting or avoiding alcohol and sedatives.** Avoid drinking alcoholic beverages at least four hours before bedtime. Sleeping pills and alcohol cause excessive relaxation of muscles, including the tissues in your throat.

- **Treating nasal congestion.** Having allergies or nasal
congestion can affect airflow through your nose. This causes mouth breathing which increases the likelihood of snoring. Oral or decongestant sprays should not be used chronically, but measures such as nasal irrigation with saline solution may help.

**What about the various devices to help with snoring?** Hundreds of devices have been patented as cures for snoring. These anti-snoring devices include dental appliances, throat sprays, nasal strips, and snoring pillows. Not all of these work for everyone, but some have been shown in clinical trials to help some. Here are a few that do seem to have some usefulness in treating simple snoring:

- **Nasal strips.** Results of studies on the effectiveness of these have been mixed. They appear to work best in individuals with mild nasal airway obstruction. Considering that they are benign, inexpensive, and readily available, they may be worth a try.

- **Oral appliances.** Over 40 different oral appliances have been patented to help with snoring. The idea behind them is that they advance the soft palate, tongue, or mandible, thus opening the airway. Some are quite expensive, requiring that a dental impression be made. Less expensive "generic" versions are available also.

- **Snoring pillows.** These are designed to position the head so that the jaw is held forward, increasing the airway opening. There is limited research showing that any particular pillow design affects snoring. Anecdotal evidence suggests that they may provide relief in some people.

- **Continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) devices.** The most common application for these is sleep apnea, but they may also have application in severe benign snoring. The CPAP device consists of a mask worn over the nose and/or face during sleep. The airways are kept open by air that is pushed into the nasal passages by a pump.

**Is surgery an option for snoring?** In general, surgery for simple snoring is a radical consideration. Snoring can usually be managed with some combination of the treatments previously mentioned. Surgery may be considered, however, in someone whose snoring has significant medical consequences, such as obstructive sleep apnea. A newer treatment option known as the Pillar Palatal Implant system may be appropriate for someone with simple snoring. This procedure involves the placement of 3 plastic implants into the soft palate under local anesthesia. The implants improve snoring by stiffening the palate which keeps it from vibrating during inspiration. Next week we'll look at a situation in which snoring is a sign of a serious medical concern.
If you or your family have any questions about snoring, please do not hesitate to sign into your eDocAmerica account and send us your questions. We are ready to help you however possible.

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