

SLEEP WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SLEEPY TIME BECOMES WEEPY TIME AS A RESULT OF SOMEONE'S SNORING? ASKS YVONNE GORDON

Snoring our pants off

How did you sleep last night? Not well? Feeling tired and grumpy this morning? Did a snorer on the other side of the bed keep you awake?

Although many won't admit to it, snoring is quite common. The Irish Sleep Society estimates that about 50 per cent of Irish men and 30 per cent of women snore, and in some cases it's a real nuisance, affecting relationships, sex lives and even jobs.

Unfortunately, it's usually the listeners that suffer most from snoring. Loud snorers keep their partners and neighbours, rather than themselves, awake. In fact, most snorers don't know

they snore, only becoming aware of it when partners tell them.

'Snoring is very common and the levels vary. Only a small proportion causes a disturbance,' says Professor Walter McNicholas, director of the Sleep Disorders Unit at St Vincent's University Hospital and president of the Irish Sleep Society.

A British study found that partners of snorers are kept awake for two hours each night – losing an astonishing two years' sleep over the average course of a relationship. 'There's no doubt that very loud snoring is a social nuisance and can cause marital disharmony,' says McNicholas.

What causes snoring?

At night, the muscles that keep the airways open can relax and become floppy. The noise of snoring is made by parts of the nose and throat vibrating as air passes through when breathing in and out.

It is more common for men and overweight people to snore and various factors can make it worse. 'Weight gain is a contributing factor,' says McNicholas. 'Snoring is worse when lying on one's back because the tongue falls backwards into the throat.'

Is there a cure? 'It's very hard to treat snoring successfully,' says McNicholas. 'There are dozens of

treatments promoted, from special pillows, to nasal strips to armbands. The Internet is replete with gadgets and devices. The overall conclusion is they don't work. There'll always be an exceptional case, but it can be a difficult condition to treat.'

Lifestyle changes important if someone wants to stop snoring. Things like maintaining an ideal weight and cutting down on smoking and alcohol can help.

'With alcohol, the throat muscles become even more relaxed,' McNicholas believes. 'Smoking can aggravate snoring because it causes direct irritation of the

throat'. Sleeping on your side also helps, as do dental devices for the mouth that widen the throat.

Sleep disorder

Snoring is a nuisance but it's not one of the 84 classified sleep disorders. However, it can sometimes be the first noticeable

symptom of a more serious sleep disorder called Obstructive Sleep Apnoea, a condition where the throat becomes blocked and a person actually stops breathing.



Bed snore: Snoring can keep partners awake for a period of two years over the course of a relationship

'A person with sleep apnoea could stop breathing 300 or 400 times per night,' says McNicholas. 'They are forced into a lighter sleep to start breathing again.' This happens so many times during the night, it prevents the person from obtaining good quality sleep and leads to daytime sleepiness. This sleepiness, along with extremely loud snoring and morning headaches, is one of the symptoms of sleep apnoea.

The Irish Sleep Apnoea Trust estimates that between two and four per cent of the adult population are affected by the condition, with possibly only ten per cent of sufferers properly diagnosed and undergoing treatment.

'It needs to be assessed,' says

McNicholas. 'Research shows that there's a huge variation between symptom levels and the severity of sleep apnoea, when studied in a laboratory. Some patients with few symptoms have severe sleep apnoea and some patients with severe symptoms have milder sleep apnoea.'

If untreated, sleep apnoea can leave a sufferer at risk of stroke, and some sufferers admit they often

feel sleepy when driving, which is extremely dangerous. However, it can be successfully treated and sufferers are usually pleasantly surprised when they go back to having a good night's sleep.

Irish Sleep Society: www.irishsleepsociety.org
Irish Sleep Apnoea Trust: www.isat.ie

ISAT's annual conference and is on April 14 at Croke Park.

HOW TO STOP SNORING

Lose weight: shedding excess fat around the neck stops extra pressure on the airways
Avoid drinking alcohol late at night: alcohol and sleeping tablets can worsen snoring
Stop smoking
Raise the head of the bed
Try to sleep on your side rather

than your back: to prevent you rolling on to your back, sew a ball into the back of your pyjama top or wedge a pillow under your back
Head colds, allergies and hayfever can make snoring worse: keep nasal passages clear by using a humidifier, inhaling steam or rubbing a few drops of eucalyptus or olbas oil on your pillowcase.

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