

Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP)

A common treatment for sleep apnea is continuous positive airway pressure, or CPAP for short. Your healthcare provider may advise CPAP, along with lifestyle changes, to help ease your symptoms.

Sleep apnea causes brief pauses in breathing while you sleep. These pauses happen when air flow through your nose or mouth becomes partially or completely blocked and air flow to the lungs becomes diminished or stopped.

You may have a physical abnormality or a narrowed airway that hampers air flow. Your brain responds to the lack of oxygen by briefly waking you up. You may snort or gasp as you start breathing again.

CPAP treatment uses gentle flowing air to keep your airway open. A machine gently blows air through a tube that's connected to a mask. You wear the mask while sleeping. It may cover just your nose, or both your nose and mouth, depending on the style of the mask and your needs. The mask also has straps to keep it in place.

Some people may be able to use nasal pillows instead of a nasal mask. Your provider will determine the best type for you.

As you sleep, the air keeps your airway open. Your healthcare provider may advise a sleep study to figure out the best CPAP settings for you. When using CPAP, you will need to see your healthcare provider periodically to check your air flow settings. They may need to be changed if you gain or lose weight or your symptoms don't improve.

To get the most benefit from CPAP treatment, you should use it every time you sleep—even when you nap. Keep in mind that it may take a few weeks for you to adjust to the treatment, particularly the mask.

Try wearing the mask for a few hours during the day to become used to it. If needed, gradually build up the amount of time you wear it at night.

CPAP is painless. But it can cause some side effects, including: Skin irritation from the mask; Dry mouth; Congestion; Runny nose or sneezing; Nose bleeds; And an upset stomach from the air flow setting.

Washing your mask daily can help prevent several side effects from CPAP, especially skin irritation. Follow the cleaning directions that came with your mask.

Some CPAP machines have a heated humidifier to relieve dry mouth and other nasal problems. The device can also be set to slowly ramp up air flow to ease any stomach troubles.

If your CPAP device is causing problems, talk with your healthcare provider. You may need a different mask or changes in the air flow setting to make it work better for you.

Soon you will be getting quality sleep.