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ASK THE Expert



DR. DAVID MERRELL

I've heard there's a dental appliance that can help stop snoring, but it only works for people who are mild snorers. Do you know anything about it?

For sleep-disordered breathing such as snoring and sleep apnea, there are two documented and accepted treatments: one is a dental appliance, which I specialize in; the other one is a C-PAP machine, a mask and pump which forces air down nasal passages or the oral airway.

The dental appliance is not new technology. It's been around for at least 15 years.

I have mild sleep apnea and use an appliance myself.

What the appliance does is pull the jaw forward, which increases the length of the airway, increases the diameter in the opening, and allows you to breathe better. Positioning the jaw forward also increases neuromuscular reflexes, which increases muscle tone lost in the deeper levels of sleep causing the airway to collapse and the tongue to fall back. In most cases, snoring is reduced 75 to 80 per cent.

Several years ago, the Canadian Thoracic Society and the American Academy for Sleep Medicine published guidelines that said for simple snoring, for upper-airway resistance and for mild to moderate sleep apnea, dental appliances are the recommended form of treatment.

For moderate to severe sleep apnea, oral appliances can also work, but I follow the guidelines of those two associations and suggest they try the C-PAP first.

We don't go ahead and treat somebody until we've got a medical diagnosis and we've done a sleep study.

Fifty per cent of people who try a C-PAP machine don't continue with it, so it has a 50-per-cent failure rate: for 25 per cent it doesn't work, 25 per cent don't like it.

I would say we have 75-per-cent success in treating people that have severe sleep apnea, as long as they have healthy teeth. If you're missing half your teeth or you have dentures, then the success rate drops significantly.

Dental appliances (there are two plates which cover the upper and lower teeth), are custom-made and run about \$2,500 to \$3,000, the same price as a good-quality C-PAP machine. You can try a temporary appliance for \$400.

We conduct sleep tests to make sure it's the appropriate treatment.

David Merrell is a dentist specializing in the treatment of sleep-disordered breathing at merrellclinic.com

E-mail questions for Ask the Expert to czdeb@thejournal.canwest.com or mail them to Ask the Expert, Body & Health, Edmonton Journal, P.O. Box 2421, Edmonton, AB, T5J 2S6