

OSA · Sleep Apnea

Your throat collapses over and over while you sleep, choking off air until your brain wakes you up gasping — CPAP holds it open so you can breathe all night.

THE STORY IN ONE SENTENCE

Your throat collapses over and over while you sleep, choking off air until your brain wakes you up gasping — CPAP holds it open so you can breathe all night.

“OSA means your airway squashes shut when you sleep; CPAP is the fix that keeps it propped open.”

Normal anatomy — the body's job

Your throat is a soft tube held open by muscles. During the day those muscles stay firm. At night during sleep they relax, but in healthy people the airway stays wide enough for air to flow freely into the lungs.

BODY'S JOB

The pharynx (the throat tube behind your mouth and nose) must stay open so air can travel from your nose and mouth down into your trachea (windpipe) and lungs. Muscles in the walls of the pharynx — the genioglossus (tongue muscle), palatoglossus (soft palate muscle), and others — keep the tube stiff and open, like tent poles holding up fabric. When you fall asleep, those muscles relax, but the airway should still stay wide enough that every breath flows smoothly and quietly.

1. You breathe in through your nose or mouth.
2. Air travels through the pharynx (the soft-walled throat tube).
3. Muscles in the pharynx walls keep the tube open, even during sleep.
4. Air flows down the trachea into the lungs, delivering oxygen to your blood.
5. You breathe out, and the cycle repeats — quietly, smoothly, all night long.

What breaks

The pharynx (throat tube) becomes too narrow or too floppy, so when the muscles relax during sleep, the walls collapse inward and block the airway completely.

CLINICAL TERM

Obstructive sleep pauses in breathing (apnea): recurrent pharyngeal collapse during sleep due to anatomic narrowing (obesity, craniofacial structure, tonsillar hypertrophy) and/or reduced pharyngeal dilator muscle tone, leading to apneas (complete airflow cessation ≥ 10 seconds) and hypopneas (partial obstruction with desaturation or arousal).

How the body compensates

Your brain will not let you suffocate. Every time the airway collapses and oxygen drops, the brain forces a brief awakening (arousal) — you gasp, the airway pops open, air rushes in, and you fall back asleep. This cycle repeats all night, so you never suffocate but you never rest either. Meanwhile your sympathetic nervous system (fight-or-flight system) floods your body with adrenaline and cortisol to keep you alive, driving up heart rate and blood pressure.

1. {'step': 'Airway collapses; oxygen saturation starts to fall', 'why': 'The pharynx squashes shut. No air flows. Oxygen in the blood (measured by pulse oximetry) drops from normal (~95–98%) toward 80% or lower.'}
2. {'step': 'Carbon dioxide (CO₂) builds up in the blood', 'why': 'Without airflow, you cannot exhale CO₂. Rising CO₂ (hypercapnia) and falling oxygen (hypoxemia) trigger alarms in the brainstem (the medulla, which monitors breathing).'}- 3. {'step': 'The brain forces a brief arousal (micro-awakening)', 'why': 'The reticular activating system in the brainstem jolts you just awake enough to tighten the pharyngeal muscles and gasp. The airway pops open, air rushes in, oxygen climbs back up. You usually do not remember waking.'}
- 4. {'step': 'The sympathetic nervous system surges', 'why': 'Each arousal floods the body with adrenaline (epinephrine) and norepinephrine from the adrenal glands and nerve endings. Heart rate spikes, blood vessels clamp down, blood pressure jumps — your body is in fight-or-flight mode.'}
- 5. {'step': 'You fall back asleep; the cycle repeats', 'why': 'Muscles relax again, the airway collapses again, and the whole sequence starts over — sometimes hundreds of times per night.'}

6. {'step': 'Daytime consequences emerge', 'why': 'Constant arousals fragment sleep architecture (you never reach deep or REM sleep long enough). Result: severe daytime sleepiness, poor concentration, memory problems, irritability, and high risk of falling asleep while driving.'}
7. {'step': 'Chronic sympathetic overdrive damages the cardiovascular system', 'why': 'Night after night of adrenaline surges and oxygen dips cause sustained high blood pressure (hypertension), stiff arteries (endothelial dysfunction), atrial fibrillation (an irregular, quivering heartbeat), heart failure, and increased risk of heart attack and stroke.'}

Domino effect

1. Airway is too narrow to stay open during sleep — Excess fat around the neck and tongue, large tonsils, a small jaw, weak pharyngeal muscles, or aging tissue laxity make the pharynx (throat tube) so narrow that when the muscles relax during sleep, the walls collapse inward and block airflow completely.
2. Apneas (breathing stops) and hypopneas (shallow breathing) occur repeatedly — Each collapse shuts off air for 10 seconds or longer (apnea) or partially blocks the airway so oxygen drops (hypopnea). The pauses in breathing (apnea)-hypopnea index (AHI) — the number of events per hour — defines severity: 5-15 is mild, 15-30 moderate, >30 severe.
3. Oxygen desaturations and CO₂ retention stress the body — With no airflow, oxygen saturation (SpO₂) falls — sometimes into the 70s or 60s — and carbon dioxide builds up. These chemical changes trigger the brainstem's respiratory centers (the medulla) to force an arousal.
4. The brain wakes you up briefly; you gasp and the airway opens — The reticular activating system jolts you awake just enough to stiffen the pharyngeal muscles. The airway pops open, you gasp or snort loudly, air rushes in, and oxygen climbs back up. You fall asleep again within seconds, usually without remembering.
5. Sleep is fragmented; you never get deep, restorative sleep — Arousals happen dozens to hundreds of times per night, yanking you out of deep (stage 3) and REM sleep before your brain can rest and repair. Result: crushing daytime sleepiness, brain fog, mood swings, and falling asleep at the wheel or at work.
6. Chronic sympathetic activation drives up blood pressure and damages the heart — Every arousal floods your body with adrenaline, norepinephrine, and cortisol (stress hormones). Night after night, this keeps your sympathetic nervous system (fight-or-flight) locked on high, causing sustained high blood pressure (hypertension) (often resistant to medication), left ventricular hypertrophy (thickened heart muscle), atrial fibrillation (an irregular, quivering heartbeat) (chaotic heart rhythm), and heart failure.

7. Inflammation, oxidative stress, and metabolic dysfunction accumulate — Repeated oxygen dips (intermittent low oxygen (hypoxia)) generate reactive oxygen species (harmful molecules) and trigger systemic inflammation (elevated C-reactive protein, cytokines). This damages blood vessel linings (endothelial dysfunction), promotes atherosclerosis (plaque buildup), worsens insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes, and raises stroke risk.
8. Without treatment, serious complications follow — Untreated OSA significantly raises the risk of stroke, heart attack, sudden cardiac death, car crashes from falling asleep at the wheel, and perioperative complications (airway obstruction during anesthesia). CPAP therapy — wearing a mask that delivers continuous positive airway pressure to hold the airway open all night — reverses these risks, restores sleep, and saves lives.

Symptoms · what the patient feels, and why

- Loud snoring that stops and starts: The soft tissue at the back of the throat collapses and blocks the airway during sleep, then vibrates loudly when air squeezes through or stops completely until the brain wakes you just enough to open it again.
- Gasping or choking during sleep: When the airway closes completely (an pauses in breathing (apnea), meaning no breathing), oxygen in the blood drops. The brain detects the danger and jolts you awake just enough to gasp and reopen the airway so you can breathe again.
- Daytime sleepiness that interferes with work or driving: Repeated wake-ups (often dozens or hundreds per night, though you may not remember them) chop up deep, restorative sleep. Without that deep sleep, the brain never gets the rest it needs, so you feel exhausted all day.
- Morning headache: During apneas, carbon dioxide (the waste gas from breathing) builds up in the blood because you are not exhaling. High carbon dioxide widens blood vessels in the brain, which causes a dull, throbbing headache when you wake up.
- Dry mouth or sore throat on waking: When the upper airway is partly blocked, you breathe through your mouth instead of your nose. Mouth breathing all night dries out the saliva and can irritate the throat.
- Trouble concentrating or memory problems: The hippocampus (the brain's memory filing center) and the prefrontal cortex (the front part that handles focus and decisions) both need deep sleep to work well. Fragmented sleep starves them of that rest, so attention and memory suffer.
- Irritability or mood swings: Chronic sleep loss disrupts serotonin and norepinephrine (brain messengers that regulate mood and stress response). Low or unsteady levels make it harder to control emotions, so small frustrations feel much bigger.

- Witnessed pauses in breathing during sleep: A bed partner or family member sees you stop breathing for ten seconds or longer, then suddenly snort or gasp. These pauses are apneas—complete airway blockages—and they are the hallmark of obstructive sleep pauses in breathing (apnea).
- Waking up to urinate multiple times at night (nocturia): Low oxygen and the struggle to breathe put stress on the heart. The heart releases atrial natriuretic peptide (a hormone that tells the kidneys to make more urine). That extra urine wakes you up to go to the bathroom, often two or more times a night.

Focused exam

- Loud snoring during sleep: Snoring means the airway is getting narrow. In sleep pauses in breathing (apnea), the airway gets so narrow that it closes completely. Snoring is the sound of air pushing through a tight space — it is your first clue that sleep pauses in breathing might be happening.
- Witnessed pauses in breathing (apnea) — the person stops breathing for 10 seconds or longer, then gasps awake: This is the hallmark of sleep pauses in breathing (apnea). The airway closes, oxygen drops, the brain wakes the person up to breathe again. This happens many times per night and breaks sleep into tiny pieces.
- Excessive daytime sleepiness — falls asleep at the wheel or during the day without warning: Sleep pauses in breathing (apnea) breaks sleep 30, 50, or even 100 times per night. The person never reaches deep sleep. Their brain is exhausted. This is not laziness — it is a broken airway stealing sleep.
- High blood pressure that is hard to control with medicine: Each time sleep pauses in breathing (apnea) closes the airway, the body releases cortisol and adrenaline (stress hormones that tell the body to fight or flee) and the heart pumps harder to keep oxygen flowing. Over months and years, this wears out the blood vessels and pushes blood pressure up.
- Irregular heart rhythm (atrial fibrillation) or heart palpitations at night: When the airway closes in sleep pauses in breathing (apnea), oxygen drops suddenly. The heart has to work harder and faster to pump oxygen to the brain. This extra work can trigger irregular rhythms in the upper chambers of the heart, and irregular rhythms raise stroke risk.
- Morning headache and dry mouth: In sleep pauses in breathing (apnea), the person gasps and breathes hard all night to fight the closed airway. This hard breathing dries out the mouth and raises carbon dioxide in the blood, which dilates the blood vessels in the brain and causes headache when the person wakes up.

- Neck circumference larger than 17 inches in men or 16 inches in women, or visible fat around the neck: Fat around the neck pushes on the airway from the outside and makes the passage smaller. When the throat muscles relax during sleep, this narrow airway closes more easily.

Diagnostics · every test answers a question

- Home sleep pauses in breathing (apnea) test (portable monitor that measures airflow, oxygen, and breathing effort while you sleep at home) → Does the person stop breathing during sleep, and how many times per hour does it happen?
- In-lab polysomnography (overnight sleep study in a hospital that records brain waves, eye movement, oxygen, airflow, heart rhythm, and leg movement) → How severe is the sleep pauses in breathing (apnea), and is it caused by the airway closing (obstructive) or the brain not sending the signal to breathe (central)?
- Epworth Sleepiness Scale (8-question survey that asks how likely you are to fall asleep in everyday situations) → How sleepy is the person during the day, and does it interfere with safety and function?
- Electrocardiogram (ECG or EKG — heart tracing that shows electrical activity) → Is sleep pauses in breathing (apnea) causing irregular heart rhythms or putting strain on the heart?
- Blood pressure measurement (at home or in clinic, ideally multiple readings over several days) → Is the person's blood pressure high, and does it stay high even on medicines?
- Hemoglobin A1c (blood test that shows average blood sugar over the past 3 months) → Is the person developing diabetes or pre-diabetes, which is common in sleep pauses in breathing (apnea)?

Treatment logic

- Continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) — a bedside machine that blows steady air through a mask into your nose or mouth while you sleep → The steady air pressure acts like a splint that holds your airway open so it cannot collapse and block. Your body stops waking up gasping, gets oxygen all night, and your brain and heart stop being stressed. Blood pressure drops, heart rhythm steadies, and daytime sleepiness goes away.
- Weight loss through calorie reduction and regular physical activity if body mass index (BMI) is ≥ 25 → Losing 10% of your body weight reduces fat around your neck and chest, which makes the airway passage bigger and reduces the number of times it collapses during sleep. AHI often drops by half.

- Oral appliance (custom-fitted mouthpiece worn at night that moves your lower jaw and tongue forward) → Pushing your jaw forward stretches the soft tissue at the back of your throat and pulls your tongue away from the airway, which opens the passage so air flows through without blocking.
- Positional therapy — wearing a device that keeps you sleeping on your side instead of your back → Sleeping on your back lets gravity pull your tongue and soft palate backward into the airway. Sleeping on your side keeps the airway open. This works if your pauses in breathing (apnea) happens mostly when you are on your back.
- Uvulopalatopharyngoplasty (UPPP) — surgery that removes extra tissue from the soft palate, uvula, and throat to widen the airway → Removing loose, floppy tissue makes the airway passage bigger so it does not collapse as easily during sleep. This surgery works best if the blockage is in the throat rather than the nose or base of the tongue.
- Hypoglossal nerve stimulation — an implanted device that sends electrical pulses to the hypoglossal nerve (the nerve that moves your tongue) to keep your tongue from falling back and blocking the airway during sleep → The device senses your breathing and pushes your tongue forward during each inhale, which keeps the airway open. This works for people who cannot tolerate CPAP and have moderate to severe sleep pauses in breathing (apnea).
- Avoid alcohol, sedatives, and sleeping pills, especially within 4 hours of bedtime → Alcohol and sedative medicines relax the muscles in your throat even more than normal sleep does, which makes the airway collapse more easily and worsens pauses in breathing (apnea). Stopping these keeps your muscles tight enough to help keep the airway open.

Medications

Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) · Medical device / airway support

CPAP is a machine that gently pushes air through a mask you wear at night. The steady stream of air acts like an invisible splint that holds your throat open. When you have sleep pauses in breathing (apnea), the soft tissue in the back of your throat relaxes and collapses during sleep, blocking the airway like a straw pinched shut. CPAP keeps constant pressure in your throat so it cannot collapse, allowing air to flow freely to your lungs all night.

1. You wear a soft mask over your nose (or nose and mouth) connected to a small bedside machine.
2. The machine pulls in room air and delivers it at a set pressure (usually 5 to 20 cm of water).
3. The pressurized air flows into your throat and acts like a gentle balloon, pushing the soft tissue outward.
4. This keeps the airway open even when the muscles relax deeply during REM sleep and other sleep stages.

5. Oxygen reaches your lungs without interruption, and carbon dioxide is cleared normally.
6. Your brain no longer has to wake you up dozens or hundreds of times a night to restart breathing.

SAFETY WATCH

Mask leaks or poor fit can cause eye irritation, skin sores on the nose bridge, or reduce the therapy's effectiveness. · Dry mouth and nasal congestion are common; using a heated humidifier chamber on the machine usually helps. · Some people feel claustrophobic with the mask at first; starting with short daytime practice sessions can ease the adjustment. · Swallowing air (aerophagia) can cause bloating or burping; lowering the pressure or changing sleep position may reduce this. · Rash or skin breakdown where the mask touches the face requires a different mask style or size. · Very rarely, high pressure can cause a pneumothorax (air leak into the chest cavity) in people with lung disease; report sudden sharp chest pain immediately.

Weight loss (diet and exercise) · Lifestyle intervention / first-line therapy

Losing weight reduces the amount of fat tissue around your neck and throat. Fat deposits press inward on the airway like a tight collar, making the tube narrower and more likely to collapse when you sleep. Shedding even 10% of your body weight can shrink these fat pads, widen the airway, and lower the number of breathing pauses each night. In many people with mild to moderate pauses in breathing (apnea), weight loss alone can bring the pauses in breathing down to safe levels or eliminate it entirely.

1. You follow a calorie-controlled eating plan and increase physical activity to create an energy deficit.
2. Your body breaks down stored fat for fuel, including the fat around the upper airway.
3. As neck circumference shrinks, the soft tissue has more room and less inward pressure.
4. The airway becomes wider and stiffer, making it harder for it to collapse during sleep.
5. Lung capacity improves as abdominal fat decreases, which also helps maintain oxygen levels.
6. Lower inflammation and better insulin sensitivity reduce swelling in airway tissues.

SAFETY WATCH

Aim for gradual loss of 1 to 2 pounds per week; rapid crash diets can cause muscle loss, gallstones, and rebound weight gain. · Very low-calorie diets should be supervised by a doctor, especially if you have diabetes or heart disease. · Increased exercise can worsen joint pain or trigger heart problems in sedentary people; start slowly and check with your doctor first. · Do not stop CPAP while losing weight unless your sleep study shows the pauses in breathing (apnea) is gone; partial improvement still requires treatment. · Weight cycling (yo-yo dieting) can make metabolic problems worse over time; sustainable habits matter more than quick results.

Oral Appliance (Mandibular Advancement Device) · Dental device / airway repositioning

An oral appliance is a custom-fitted mouthpiece you wear at night that looks like a sports mouth guard. It holds your lower jaw (mandible) slightly forward, which pulls the tongue and soft tissue away from the back of your throat. By moving the jaw forward, the device opens up the space behind the tongue and makes it harder for the airway to collapse. It works best for mild to moderate sleep pauses in breathing (apnea) or for people who cannot tolerate CPAP.

1. A dentist or sleep specialist takes molds of your teeth and fits a device with upper and lower trays.
2. The trays are connected so the lower one holds your jaw 4 to 8 millimeters forward from its resting position.
3. Moving the jaw forward pulls the tongue muscle forward because the tongue is attached to the inside of the lower jaw.
4. This increases the front-to-back space in the throat and tenses the soft tissue so it is less floppy.
5. The airway stays wider during sleep, reducing the number of collapses and pauses.
6. Snoring often improves because the soft palate vibrates less when it is held forward.

SAFETY WATCH

Jaw soreness, tooth pain, or bite changes can occur, especially in the first few weeks; report persistent pain to your dentist. · Excessive salivation or dry mouth is common; it usually improves after the adjustment period. · Long-term use can shift teeth or change your bite; follow-up dental checks every 6 to 12 months are important. ·

Temporomandibular joint (TMJ) pain or clicking can worsen if you already have jaw problems; tell your dentist before starting. · The device must be cleaned daily to prevent bacterial buildup and bad odor. · A follow-up sleep study is needed after fitting to confirm the appliance is actually lowering your pauses in breathing (apnea) events—do not assume it is working without testing.

Positional Therapy · Behavioral intervention

Positional therapy trains you to avoid sleeping on your back. In many people, sleep pauses in breathing (apnea) is much worse in the supine (back) position because gravity pulls the tongue and soft palate backward into the airway. Sleeping on your side keeps the tongue from falling back and opens the throat. Devices like special pillows, vibrating alarms, or a tennis ball sewn into the back of a shirt remind you to stay off your back all night.

1. You use a positional device or technique that makes back sleeping uncomfortable or alerts you when you roll onto your back.
2. Staying on your side reduces the gravitational collapse of the tongue and soft tissue.
3. The airway remains more open, and the number of pauses in breathing (apnea) events drops.
4. Over time, the new sleep position can become a habit, though many people still need a reminder device.

SAFETY WATCH

Shoulder or hip discomfort from prolonged side sleeping; using a supportive pillow between the knees can help. · Positional devices can cause skin irritation or disturb your bed partner if they vibrate or beep. · A follow-up sleep study in the side position is needed to confirm that pauses in breathing (apnea) is controlled; do not rely on positional therapy alone without testing.

Avoid Alcohol and Sedatives · Lifestyle modification / risk reduction

Alcohol and sedative medications (like benzodiazepines, sleeping pills, and opioids) relax the muscles in your throat even more than normal sleep does. This makes the airway floppier and more likely to collapse. These substances also dull the brain's response to low oxygen and high carbon dioxide, so you take longer to wake up and restart breathing after a pause. Avoiding

them—especially in the hours before bed—keeps your airway tone stronger and your brain's protective reflexes sharper.

1. Alcohol or sedatives bind to GABA receptors in the brain (GABA is the brain's main calming signal).
2. This increases inhibition in the brain, which relaxes muscles throughout the body, including the throat.
3. The genioglossus and other pharyngeal muscles become weaker and let the tongue and soft palate sag backward.
4. The arousal threshold rises, meaning your brain is slower to wake you when oxygen drops or carbon dioxide builds up.
5. By skipping alcohol and sedatives, you preserve normal muscle tone and keep your protective wake-up reflex intact.

SAFETY WATCH

If you take a sedative or opioid prescribed for pain or another condition, talk to your doctor before stopping; sudden withdrawal can be dangerous. · Avoid over-the-counter sleep aids (like diphenhydramine or doxylamine) unless your doctor says they are safe for you. · Limit alcohol to small amounts earlier in the day, at least 3 to 4 hours before bedtime. · Marijuana and CBD products can also relax airway muscles; discuss use with your sleep specialist.

Red flags

- Falling asleep while driving or during conversations
- New or worsening high blood pressure that does not respond to medicine
- Witnessed breathing pauses longer than ten seconds, especially with turning blue or gray
- Chest pain, irregular heartbeat, or waking up gasping for air with a racing heart
- Severe daytime sleepiness in someone who operates heavy machinery or cares for children

Nursing priorities

1. Check oxygen saturation with pulse oximetry every 4 hours and during sleep if the patient is admitted to the hospital. — Repeated apneas drop oxygen saturation below 90 percent and cause low oxygen in the blood (hypoxemia) (low blood oxygen) that damages the heart and brain; monitoring catches dangerous drops needing immediate intervention.
2. Keep the head of the bed elevated at least 30 degrees at all times. — Gravity pulls the tongue and soft palate (roof of mouth tissue) forward when the head is up, which keeps the airway more open and reduces the number of pauses in breathing (apnea) episodes.

3. Make sure the CPAP machine is set up correctly with a mask that seals without gaps and tubing that is not kinked. — Air leaks or blocked tubing drop the pressure inside the airway so it cannot splint (hold open) the floppy throat tissues, making CPAP useless and allowing apneas to continue.
4. Teach the patient to avoid alcohol, sedatives, and sleeping pills, especially within 6 hours of bedtime. — These drugs relax the throat muscles even more than sleep does, which makes the airway collapse more easily and increases pauses in breathing (apnea) frequency and duration.
5. Watch for signs of right heart strain such as swelling in the legs, neck veins that bulge, or new shortness of breath. — Severe OSA causes pulmonary high blood pressure (hypertension) (high pressure in lung blood vessels) because low oxygen makes those vessels squeeze tight, forcing the right heart to pump harder until it weakens.
6. Screen for depression and memory problems using simple questions about mood and whether the patient forgets recent events. — Chronic sleep fragmentation and low oxygen damage the hippocampus (memory center in the brain) and drop serotonin (mood chemical), causing depression in 50 percent of OSA patients and mild cognitive impairment.
7. Coordinate a referral to a dietitian if BMI is over 25 and discuss a weight-loss goal of 10 percent of body weight. — Fat deposits in the tongue and throat narrow the airway; losing just 10 percent of weight can cut pauses in breathing (apnea) severity in half and some patients can stop CPAP completely.
8. Educate the patient that CPAP must be used every night for at least 4 hours to prevent heart attack and stroke. — Each pauses in breathing (apnea) spikes blood pressure and stress hormones; without nightly CPAP use, the cumulative vascular damage doubles the risk of heart attack (myocardial infarction) (heart attack) and stroke (cerebrovascular accident) (stroke).

Sources

- American Academy of Sleep Medicine (AASM) clinical practice guideline 2020
- American Thoracic Society (ATS) OSA statement
- U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) 2022 screening recommendation
- UpToDate clinical topic review on obstructive sleep apnea in adults

Last reviewed: 2026-07-07