

NOTES

Your doctor or therapist has given you this patient education handout to further explain or remind you about an issue related to your health. This handout is a general guide only. If you have specific questions, discuss them with your doctor or therapist.

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Making CPAP Work for You

By Debra Yemenijian

You just have been diagnosed with obstructive sleep apnea, and your physician has prescribed continuous positive airway pressure therapy to treat your symptoms. But the idea of sleeping with a mask and tubing is frightening. What do you do?

If you don't comply with treatment, it can lead to complications of OSA, such as fatigue, confusion, hypertension, heart disease, decreased productivity and falling asleep at inappropriate times. By finding ways to make CPAP more comfortable and use it on a regular basis, your OSA will be manageable. You'll be able to get the sleep you need and improve your quality of life.

MASK FIT

A variety of mask designs and materials are available to enhance your CPAP experience. Some masks include an adjustable pad that rests on the forehead. Others may use a soft foam or gel-like material that molds to your facial contours for a more comfortable fit.

Proper mask fit is essential for CPAP compliance because it will minimize air leaks, which can be large enough to disrupt your night's rest. Use adjustable headgear to properly position your mask. Headgear should be snug enough for a good fit in all sleeping positions. Straps that are too loose allow air leaks, and straps that are too tight can break the mask's seal and cause discomfort.

You may be able to use quick-release straps that allow for easy removal of the mask. They also keep the straps in place so you don't have to adjust them each time you use the mask.

If you breathe through your mouth at night, an adjustable chin strap can keep your mouth closed. Another option is to try a full face mask or oral mask instead of a nasal mask.

Nasal pillows are a choice for patients who prefer not to use a mask. They can insert into their nostrils two small oval-shaped prongs that are attached to a plastic adapter connected to the CPAP tubing. The pillows may solve the problem of allergies to mask material and claustrophobia complaints.

DESENSITIZATION

It's natural to need time to adjust to CPAP therapy. Instead of using the device immediately, familiarize yourself with your mask and machine. Then, ramping your CPAP at a low pressure setting, hold the mask loosely against your face for brief periods of time while sitting up. Do this until you can breathe while holding the mask in place for a minute or more.

Once you're used to having the mask in place, strap the mask on, making sure that it's not so tight that it hurts or so loose that air leaks irritate your eyes. The ramp will increase the airway pressure to your prescribed setting. When you're ready, lie down as you would when you sleep.

If you have difficulty sleeping with the mask on your face, acclimate yourself to the mask outside of the

bedroom. With the exhalation port open, wear the mask around the house for an hour or two each day while doing something relaxing like watching television. Using CPAP for short naps also may be helpful.

HUMIDIFICATION

Humidification can help improve CPAP conditions and make adjusting to your therapy easier, but little information is available on just how well humidification will increase compliance. Cold or heated humidification works by relieving upper airway drying and inflammation when your nasal airway is unable to maintain sufficient warmth for the increased air flow of CPAP.

No matter which methods you choose to comply with CPAP, make sure you inform your physician of your progress so that he or she knows how well treatment is working for you. ■

Editor's note: Information adapted from the American Sleep Apnea Association, the American College of Chest Physicians, and SleepQuest.

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