

The only thing worse than being a snorer is being the wife or husband of a snorer

# SLEEP WRECKER

By Sandi Kahn Shelton  
Register Staff

If you're settling down for your "long winter's nap" and finding it interrupted by the noisy ZZZs from your bed partner, you're not alone.

Estimates vary, but researchers in Toronto say that, at some point, 71 percent of men snore, as well as 51 percent of women. And some marriage counselors say that as many as 85 percent of couples sleep in separate bedrooms when one partner is even a moderate snorer.

You know the conventional wisdom: You're a moderate snorer if your spouse can't sleep. You're a heavy snorer if the neighbors can't sleep.

Stan Tamarkin of Woodbridge may not have awakened any neighbors, but his snoring kept his wife, Jane, in a perpetual state of awakeness — and fury. She was constantly sending him off to sleep in a spare bedroom, known between them as the "snoratorium."

"If this house had been a one-bedroom apartment, this marriage would have long since been over," says Jane Tamarkin. "He would have been toast. Once my gentle nudges didn't work to stop him from snoring, I could see that something had to be done."

There are hundreds of snoring remedies out there, all with various degrees of effectiveness: nasal sprays, breathing strips that fit over the bridge of the nose, mouthpieces that hold the jaw in place, even special pillows to keep your chin away from your chest — or pillows fitted with alarms that ring when snoring begins.

There are herbal products, homeopathic remedies, special aromatherapy oils, even a product called SnorePlugs, which clip inside the nose. There are oral strips that dissolve on the roof of the mouth and coat the soft tissues in the back of the throat in an attempt to keep them from vibrating, and an acupuncture ring that you wear on your pinky finger that is supposed to connect with the nerves of the mouth and nose. If all that fails, there are specially made earplugs for the snorer's bed partner.

A study published in December in the British Medical Journal says that patients who take didgeridoo lessons show reduced snoring and less daytime sleepiness. The benefit presumably isn't from the sound of this Australian instrument, but from the fact that playing it tones the muscles in the airways.

The didgeridoo lessons were news to Dr. Mark Aferzon, an ear, nose and throat specialist in Derby, but he sees patients — mostly men, dragged in by their wives, he says — who have tried lots of different remedies before coming to the doctor. One of the main home remedies he's heard of, he says, is sewing tennis balls into the back of a nightshirt, so that when the sleeper rolls over on his back, he wakes up and settles back down on his side. (Back-sleeping is considered

one of the main causes of snoring.)

So why do people snore in the first place? Basically, according to Janet Hilbert, a sleep physician at Gaylord Sleep Center in Wallingford, snoring happens when something obstructs the flow of air. Sometimes it's a blocked nose, sometimes it's the base of your tongue restricting your breathing. But most commonly, it's the soft tissue in your

upper palate or throat getting in the way of your air passages and beginning to vibrate.

In other words, when you snore, you're basically an example of a wind instrument performing a middle-of-the-night concert.

Sometimes, though, snoring is evidence of a more serious, underlying problem: obstructive sleep apnea. Those who have sleep apnea actually stop breathing during sleep, perhaps dozens of times an hour. Because this reduces the amount of oxygen to the brain, sleep apnea can lead to potentially serious consequences, including stroke and heart attack.

Tamarkin discovered that it was a moderate case of sleep apnea that was at the root of his snoring.

He spent the night at the Gaylord Sleep Center, where he was diagnosed.

The treatment was called CPAP, which stands for continuous positive airway pressure.

Tamarkin sleeps with a mask over his nose, which sends pressurized air into his lungs and keeps the soft tissues from collapsing while he sleeps.

Aferzon says that about 50 percent of people can tolerate the mask. Other treatments for snoring include surgery or radio frequency waves to remove part of the uvula, that little thing that dangles in the back of the throat and can block the airways.

But if you suffer from snoring — and it's not sleep apnea — there are a couple of things you can do as a first line of defense, Aferzon says. First,

lose weight. Obesity is one of the main causes of snoring. Other possible aids: avoid alcohol at night, stop smoking, sleep on your side, and if your snoring is due to allergies, take a nasal decongestant.

And if all else fails, there's always the didgeridoo.

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Knight Ridder

# Sensitive season

## Spring allergy assault in full swing

By JAIMIE CURA  
Staff writer

**H**anging clothes on the line to dry, eating a picnic lunch in the park, driving with the windows down — these activities are synonymous with warm weather — and allergies.

"This time of the year, there's trees, grass and molds, which are big in the fall and spring," said Dr. Kevin McGrath, an allergist and outpatient specialist for St. Vincent's Medical Center in Bridgeport, with offices in Fairfield and Wethersfield.

According to pollen.com, the predominant pollens for Bridgeport for this week are maple, birch and oak, with a pollen level peaking at 11.5 for the week. The Web site said that count is high and can affect those who suffer from pollen allergies, possibly causing severe symptoms.

McGrath said allergy symptoms include postnasal drip, a sore, scratchy throat, sinus pressure, wheezing, coughing, fatigue and dark circles under the eyes.

"The dark circles under the eyes are from increased blood flow to the nose," said McGrath, "not lack of sleep."

Seasonal allergies, like pollen and ragweed, cause trouble in the spring, summer and fall

months, but there are also perennial, or year-round allergies, like cat and dog allergies and dust mites, said Dr. Mark Aferzon, an ear, nose and throat specialist and allergist with Griffin Hospital in Derby.

"Dust mites are microscopic organisms that feed off of dead skin," said Aferzon, adding that their fecal matter is what some people are allergic to. "There are thousands of them in people's beds."

Aferzon said to wash sheets frequently in hot water and use covers for the bed and pillows.

For seasonal allergies like pollen and other outdoor elements, McGrath said the best thing to do is use air conditioning in the house and car.

"Do not use fans in the windows or drive with the windows open," said McGrath. "Don't hang clothes on the line because you're bringing pollen into the house."

McGrath also said not to exercise outside at noontime because pollen levels are the highest.

Short-term symptoms should be seen by a family physician, McGrath said, adding if symptoms persist for more than a few weeks, see an allergist.

There are over-the-counter medications that can help with allergy symptoms, like antihistamines, nasal sprays and decongestants.

McGrath said to be cautious with decongestants because they can keep some people

up at night and could aggravate high blood pressure and seizures. For men over 40, McGrath said there could be an increased chance of prostate cancer.

"The way decongestants work is that they shrink down blood vessels," said Aferzon, "not only in the nose, but they clamp blood vessels everywhere."

This can increase blood pressure, Aferzon said, and potentially cause heart palpitations or strokes, but that is a rare occurrence.

Aferzon said nasal decongestants can be addicting. In the sprays, the active ingredient is oxymetazoline, and while nasal decongestants do cause swollen blood vessels to shrink, the nose can get used to the effect and require more of the medication to work effectively.

"It takes a greater amount of the stuff in greater frequencies," he said.

Other treatments can include allergy shots, but Aferzon said that is not a quick fix, often taking a few months before any improvements take place. After that, he said the shots can require years of maintenance.

In the short term, McGrath offered this advice for allergy sufferers.

"You can control the environment," he said, by being mindful of what causes one's allergies and making measures to diminish its impact. "That's a type of treatment, too."

## Q & A on sneezing, pollen count and other allergy concerns

### GANNETT NEWS SERVICE

Grab your tissues and favorite over-the-counter remedy and in between sneezes, check out these answers to allergy questions, provided by a variety of allergy experts.

**Q:** What's making me sneeze now?

**A:** Trees. But wind carries pollen molecules hundreds of miles, so don't turn the front yard into a field of stumps just yet.

In early summer, grasses will start pollinating. And by late summer into fall, the weeds — hello, ragweed! — will make their appearance.

**Q:** How many people are suffering with me?

**A:** About 50 million Americans suffer from asthma and allergy, and hay is the culprit behind 16.7 million doctor's visits annually. Allergy-

related health care costs total \$18 billion a year.

**Q:** What causes an allergic reaction?

**A:** In most allergic reactions, the body's immune system is responding to a false alarm by treating an allergen as an invader that has to be attacked. The immune system generates antibodies called IgE. Each type of IgE is specific to a particular substance, such as a type of pollen or mold. When the allergen meets the IgE, chemicals like histamine are formed, and inflammation — swollen, itchy eyes, hives, etc. — results.

**Q:** What kinds of plants produce the most allergens?

**A:** Grasses, trees and weeds that don't produce showy flowers pump out the kinds and amounts of pollen that are most likely to cause allergic reactions. Plain-Jane plants produce

small, light, dry pollen granules that are tailor-made to be carried for miles by winds.

**Q:** How do I interpret pollen counts?

**A:** Pollen and mold counts are usually reported as low, moderate, high or very high, referring to how likely the amount recorded is to cause an allergic reaction. The counts themselves refer to the amount found in a sample of air captured over the previous 24 hours. So the count you read each morning actually refers to the average amount collected the previous day.

**Q:** How can I ease allergy symptoms without medication?

**A:** The easiest way is to reduce your exposure to the allergen. If pollen or mold is the problem, try to stay indoors during peak exposure hours or when there's an air quality

advisory.

Keep windows closed during pollen seasons and use an air conditioner to filter air in summer. Indoor air cleaners also can reduce pollen, mold and dust.

**Q:** How can I tell whether it's allergies or a cold that's making me sneeze?

**A:** Your best clue lies in how long your symptoms last. Allergies are earmarked by runny or stuffy nose, sneezing, wheezing and itchy, watery eyes. Symptoms begin right after you're exposed to the allergen and last until the allergen leaves the environment. If you're allergic to something that's always in the environment — dust, cats, etc. — your symptoms will last year-round.

Colds usually last four to seven days, and it takes a few days for the virus to incubate.