



CPAP Basics

What is it?

Continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) keeps your airway open as you sleep by providing you with a steady stream of air. Most CPAP units are about the size of a small tissue box and weigh only two to three pounds making it easy to keep at the bedside.

To power the unit, you simply plug it into the wall. The box has a fan that pushes air through a tube. The tube is connected to a mask that you wear as you sleep. The mask allows the air to gently blow into the back of your throat. This keeps the airway open and prevents pauses in breathing as you sleep. The mask must fit and make a seal in order to keep your throat open and correct the apnea problem. A good mask seal will prevent air leaks and maintain the proper level of air pressure.

The amount of air pressure needed is different for each person. A CPAP study during an overnight sleep study will show your sleep doctor the level that is right for you.

CPAP units come with a variety of features. Most units now have a pressure “ramp” setting. This timed setting starts the machine at a very low level of air pressure. It slowly raises the pressure until it reaches the right level.

Humidifiers are a common accessory for CPAP units. They provide cool or heated moisture to the air coming from the CPAP unit. This can reduce side effects and make it easier for you to breathe through the mask. Some CPAP units now come with an “integrated” humidifier that is connected to the machine.

New technology is making it easier for you to receive the maximum benefit from your CPAP therapy. Many CPAP units are now able to track your hourly usage and produce detailed data for your doctor. Some machines can also keep track of mask leaks and snoring. Depending on your model, you may be able to download this information to a computer or store it on a data card. This information can help your physician monitor your treatment progress without requiring you to make an office visit. Some units even allow your doctor to program your data card with changes to your air pressure level.

The types of CPAP that are available to you may vary. It can depend on your insurance coverage and also the region of the country where you live.

Some people with sleep apnea have other medical conditions that make their breathing problems more complicated. They may have lung, heart or brain problems. These people may need to have oxygen added to the air in their CPAP systems.

There are three types of mask systems that are most common with CPAP. The first and most commonly used is a nasal mask; this mask covers only your nose for the majority of people that breathe through their nose while sleeping. The second is a full face mask; this covers both your nose and mouth. This mask works best for those who breathe primarily through their mouth while sleeping. The third is nasal pillows; this system uses silicone tubes that fit directly into your nostrils. Nasal pillows can help eliminate air leaks and gives you a greater sense of freedom. However, nasal pillows cannot be used where the CPAP pressure is at a higher level. Your sleep technician will start with the mask they feel is the best fit for your needs and facial structure. The mask used during your study is usually the mask you will use at home.

No matter what type of mask you use, it is most important that it fits well. The mask must fit snugly to prevent leaks and be comfortable for you. You may have to make small adjustments to the mask, tubing, straps and headgear until you get the right fit.

Who gets it?

CPAP is the most common and effective treatment for obstructive sleep apnea. It may also be used to help people who have other sleep-related breathing problems.

Possible side effects?

CPAP may cause increased nasal congestion. This can often be relieved with a saline nasal spray, a decongestant or a heated humidifier.

CPAP may also cause your throat to be dry or sore. A heated humidifier that fits your CPAP unit can ease this symptom.

Other side effects are rare.

For more information, please visit SleepEducation.com