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CPAP is an important treatment for obstructive sleep apnea, but it's not without its frustrations. Learn how to avoid uncomfortable masks and other common CPAP problems.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

Continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) therapy is a common treatment for obstructive sleep apnea. It includes a small machine that supplies a constant and steady air pressure, a hose, and a mask or nose piece.

Common problems with CPAP include a leaky mask, trouble falling asleep, and a dry mouth or nose.

The good news is that if one CPAP mask or device doesn't work for you, you have other options. And most CPAP masks are adjustable, to help make them more comfortable for you.

Here are 10 common CPAP problems and what you can do about them:

1. The wrong size or style CPAP mask

Work closely with your doctor and CPAP supplier to make sure you have a CPAP mask that suits your needs and fits you. Everyone has different needs and face shapes, so the right style and size mask for someone else may not work for you.

- **Many mask styles are available.** A range of CPAP masks are available. For example, some feature full face masks that cover your mouth and nose, with straps that stretch across your forehead and cheeks. These may make some people feel claustrophobic, but they work well at providing a stable fit if you move around a lot in your sleep.

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Other masks feature nasal pillows that fit under your nose and straps that cover less of your face. These can feel less cumbersome.

Nasal pillows may work well if you wear glasses or read with the mask on, because some nasal pillow systems obstruct vision less than do full face masks. However, they may not work if you move around a lot in your sleep or sleep on your side.

- **Pay attention to size.** Most masks come in different sizes. Just because you're a certain size in one mask doesn't mean you'll be the same size in another. CPAP masks are usually adjustable.

Ask your doctor or CPAP supplier to show you how to adjust your mask to get the best fit. Manufacturer product instructions also can help show you how to do this.

2. Trouble getting used to wearing the CPAP device

To start, it may help to practice wearing just the CPAP mask for short periods of time while you're awake, for example, while watching TV. Then try wearing the mask and hose with the air pressure on, still during the daytime, while you're awake.

Once you become accustomed to how that feels, shift to using the CPAP device every time you sleep — at night and during naps. Inconsistently wearing the CPAP device may delay getting used to it. Stick with it for several weeks or more to see if the mask and pressure settings you have will work for you.

3. Difficulty tolerating forced air

You may be able to overcome this by using a "ramp" feature on the machine. This feature allows you to start with low air pressure, followed by an automatic, gradual increase in the pressure to your prescribed setting as you fall asleep. The rate of this ramp feature can be adjusted by your doctor.

If this doesn't help, talk with your doctor about changing to a different type of device that automatically adjusts the pressure while you're sleeping. For example, units that supply bi-level positive airway pressure (B-PAP) or devices that have variable pressure contours are available. These provide more pressure when you inhale and less when you exhale.

4. Dry, stuffy nose

A CPAP device that features a heated humidifier, which attaches to the air pressure machine, can help. The level of humidification is adjustable. Using a nasal saline spray at bedtime also can help.

Your doctor may prescribe a nasal steroid spray if your dryness doesn't respond to heated humidity. It's also important that your mask fit well. A leaky mask can dry out your nose.

5. Feeling claustrophobic

While you're awake, practice by first just holding the mask up to your face without any of the other parts. Once you're comfortable with that, try wearing the mask with the straps.

Next, try holding the mask and hose on your face, without using

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the straps. Have the hose attached to the CPAP machine at a low-pressure setting (with ramp feature turned on). And, finally, wear the mask with the straps and with the air pressure machine turned on while awake. After you're comfortable with that, try sleeping with it on.

Relaxation exercises, such as progressive muscle relaxation, also may help reduce your anxiety. It may help to get a different size mask or try a different style, such as one that uses nasal pillows.

If you're still feeling claustrophobic, talk to your doctor or CPAP supplier.

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