



CONTINUOUS POSITIVE AIRWAY PRESSURE (CPAP)

CPAP is a machine that is commonly used to treat Sleep Apnea by keeping the airways open by using mild air pressure. CPAP machines have a motor that blows air into a tube that connects to a mask fitting over the user's nose or nose and mouth. Some CPAP machines have heated humidifiers to make the air humid and warm. A strap fits around the user's head, and sometimes chin, to keep the mask in place.

Most CPAP machines are lightweight, small, and make a soft rhythmic noise. Some are even portable and easy to travel with. CPAP machines are considered medical devices. They are prescribed by medical doctors. After receiving a prescription, Veterans can obtain the machines from CPAP providers who contract with the VA. These CPAP providers often offer telephone-based technical support and advice.

How does CPAP help Veterans with obstructive sleep apnea?

CPAP is often the best treatment for Veterans with obstructive sleep apnea. Veterans are instructed to use CPAP machines while sleeping to keep their airways from becoming blocked or collapsing. By keeping the airways open, CPAP improves the quality of sleep and reduces snoring. CPAP can also relieve the bothersome symptom of excessive daytime sleepiness and morning headache. Also, CPAP can prevent or decrease high blood pressure.

Why is it so important to use CPAP exactly as prescribed?

Even one night of not using CPAP as prescribed can lead to excessive daytime sleepiness and or a morning headache the next day.

What common challenges do Veterans have with CPAP and what can they do about them?

The most common challenge Veterans have is not using their CPAP machine every night or taking the mask off during the night. Here are some common reasons for this, as well as helpful information:

REASON: The mask leaks air. This can be caused by having the wrong size or style of mask. There are a variety of masks to choose from, and there's also an option involving only nasal pillows. Air leakage could also be caused by having air pressure turned up too high. Talk to your doctor or CPAP provider about mask options and air pressure settings.

REASON: Your mouth or nose gets dry. Again, this is an issue to talk with your doctor or CPAP provider about. You may benefit from a change to the air pressure settings, a mask change, and/or a humidity change. Your doctor may also recommend a nasal spray or other medication.

REASON: You become afraid or anxious when you wear your mask. This is a common problem, especially for Veterans. There are things you can do to "desensitize" yourself to the mask and your doctor can help you develop a tailored plan to do this.

REASON: You are having trouble getting used to wearing the CPAP mask. You may start gradually by wearing the mask for short periods of time while you are awake and doing something like reading or watching TV. Then, you could try wearing the mask and the hose with the air pressure on while awake. After you become comfortable with this, you can start to wear the mask when you sleep, during naps, and at night.



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REASON: You toss and turn and take the mask off in the middle of the night without knowing it. Full face masks that cover both the nose and mouth, with a chin strap, may work best for Veterans who move around a lot in their sleep. You may consider setting an alarm in the middle of the night to remind you to check if your mask is still on. Finally, if your nose is congested, you may pull the mask off to breath. In this case, talk with your doctor about heated humidity.

REASON: It is too loud. Most CPAP machines are quiet and only emit a soft rhythmic sound. If it is louder, check to make sure the air filter is unblocked and clean. Also, you can try wearing earplugs.

Tips for using CPAP:

- Work with your doctor and CPAP provider, at the outset, to select the best CPAP equipment for your needs. Tell them about your preferred sleeping positions and whether or not you tend to move around a lot in your sleep. This information can be helpful when selecting the best mask for you. Your doctor may need you to do sleep studies to determine what air pressure is best for you and to find out if CPAP is working. There are many CPAP machine options on the market, and most CPAP machines can be adjusted so the air pressure, humidity, and/or mask, are just right for you.
- Once you and your doctor have selected the best CPAP for you, see your doctor regularly to make sure your CPAP continues to work well and tell your doctor or CPAP provider as new challenges arise. Tell them if you experience any of the common challenges listed above and any unique problems you may have. Once you tell them, you can then learn about and discuss solutions with them.
- Keep your CPAP machine clean by following the cleaning instructions provided by the manufacturer. This can prevent it from accumulating dust, mold, or mildew. A dirty CPAP machine can make you sick and may also get noisy.

As you can see, there are a lot of factors to consider when selecting and using a CPAP machine. Many Veterans find it takes time to find the best fit for them and even then, things change over time. Patience, communication with your doctor and CPAP provider, and commitment to adhering to CPAP use is essential.