

CPAP Advice

What is CPAP?

CPAP or continuous positive airway pressure is a machine that uses air pressure delivered through a mask to open up the airway in order to prevent obstruction. You will receive a machine, a 6 foot long tubing (longer is available if needed), and a mask.

Why is it important to use CPAP?

Obstructive sleep apnea disrupts sleep, causing daytime symptoms such as sleepiness, fatigue, concentration difficulties, headaches, and irritability. Sleep apnea also increases blood pressure and risks of strokes, heart attacks and sudden death. Treatment with CPAP has been shown to reduce these risks back to the level of people without sleep apnea.

Mask types

There are 4 main mask types: nasal pillows, nasal mask, full face and pillow full face masks. The nasal pillows are the smallest masks that just covers the nostrils. They often cannot be used with pressures over 15 and are the hardest to keep in place. Nasal masks go around the nose and full face masks cover the mouth and nose. If someone has a very blocked nose or tends to open their mouth during sleep they may require a full face mask. The last type of mask has nasal pillows for the nose, but also a mask to go over the mouth. Chin straps can be used to help keep the mouth shut while using a nasal mask.

Equipment

The equipment should be washed regularly as directed by the home care company. Masks, tubing and filters should be replaced approximately every 6 months. Many masks do last longer but if a leak develops then the mask should be changed. Insurance companies often pay for replacements every 3-12 months, your home-care company will know this information.

Getting started with CPAP

CPAP does not help most people fall asleep, but it can help people stay asleep. Don't expect to be able to wear the mask throughout the night immediately. It is normal to have some nights where you can't fall asleep with it on or need to take it off after a couple of hours. The most important thing is to keep trying every night. For most people this adjustment period takes 1-2 weeks.

Mask fit

The most important thing for success with CPAP is finding a mask that fits well. It should not hurt or leave significant red marks. Air should not escape from around the mask. Many people can improve mask fit by adjusting the straps or the forehead piece. Sometimes keeping the straps looser rather than tighter decreases leak by allowing a cushion of air to develop. If you can't get your mask to fit, it is important to let the homecare company or your doctor know as soon as possible so they can either help you adjust it or get a different mask. A dry mouth may be a sign that there is mouth breathing and a full face mask may be needed. Gel pads to go under the mask are available if the mask is irritating your nasal bridge

Claustrophobia or mask fear

This is a lifetime process so a few extra days getting used to the mask is more important than never using it. If you feel uncomfortable with wearing the mask at night, start during the day. First practice putting on and taking off the mask until you are comfortable with it. Then try to use it while you are sitting around watching TV. Once you feel comfortable breathing through the mask while you are awake try to sleep with it.

Water in the tubing

Water can condense out into the tubing if the humidity setting is too high or if the room is too cold compared to the air causing “rain-out”. Insulation sleeves or heated tubing can be used around the tubing to minimize “rain-out”. Increasing the room temperature or room humidity may also help.

Ramp setting

If the pressure feels too high when you start using the mask, use the ramp setting to start with a lower pressure which will then gradually increase usually over 5-45 minutes. If you feel like you aren't getting enough air then don't use the ramp.

FLEX or EPR setting

If you are having difficulty breathing out against the pressure increase the FLEX or expiratory pressure relief (EPR) setting to 3. This will lower the pressure briefly right as you breathe out making it more comfortable.

Humidity

For most people it is important to use the humidifier. Dry air can irritate the nose leading to more nasal congestion and runny nose. You may need a higher setting in the winter and lower setting in the summer when it is more humid. Distilled water is recommended by the homecare company to decrease minerals from depositing in the humidifier chamber, but tap water is also safe to use.

Changing settings

Most machines give easy access to change the ramp, FLEX/EPR and humidity settings. They do not allow you to change your pressure setting so you will not accidentally change it. If you feel the pressure is too high or too low, talk to your doctor.

Sleeping position

While we try to adjust the pressure to open the airway whether the patient is sleeping on their side or back, there is often still more obstruction while sleeping on the back. Trying to sleep on your side with the machine is recommended. They are usually not needed, but there are CPAP pillows which have a cut out to fit the mask and help encourage sleeping on the side. There are positioning devices that can also be used to make you don't sleep on your back.

Nasal congestion

If you have frequent nasal congestion, talk to your doctor about nasal sprays that may be helpful. If you get a cold, you can stop using the machine for a few days until you feel better.

Waking up at night

If you keep waking up at night despite the CPAP, the pressure or mask may need to be adjusted. Obstruction usually worsens in dream (REM) sleep which occurs every couple of hours, which can be the reason for awakenings.

Compliance data

Most machines collect data on mask leak, pressure settings, and obstructive events. We may be able to get data online through a modem, but please bring your machine to all your visits so we can collect the data and make adjustments if needed. This will help us determine whether the mask is working optimally. Your home care company may also have you send the data to them for insurance purposes. Most insurance companies require proof of using the mask regularly for at least 4 hours per 24 hour periods on over 70% of days.