

Chicago Tribune

SNORERS GATHER IN SEARCH OF SILENCE

Couples learn of gadget that might bring sleep By Susan Berger

Special to the Tribune--

It was not your typical party. There was no occasion to celebrate. No Tupperware. No Botox injections and no charity to rally around.

What drew 20 North Shore residents on a recent Thursday night was, for them, the most exciting prospect of all: a good night's sleep.

As Wilmette resident Nancy Rothstein, 51, explained to her guests, being around a snorer is a nightmare. Rothstein explained how she would poke her husband, Steven, 54, finger snap in his ear or yell, "Turn over!" And if that didn't work, she would camp out with her children or on a couch.

"I felt bad waking him," Rothstein said. "But I couldn't take it." Thanks to a dental device named The Silencer, all is well at the Rothstein house. Musical beds have stopped, and the silence in the bedroom is music to Nancy Rothstein's ears.

The Silencer, designed to be worn in the mouth during sleep, much like a retainer, positions the lower jaw to help open the airway.

The party was the brainchild of the Rothsteins and their friend Harry Major, 56, of Wilmette, who wanted to spread the word about their success in overcoming snoring. They hosted what they say is the first snoring party ever featuring the inventor of the device, Dr. Michael Gelb, a New York dentist.

Steven Rothstein, eager to find a cure for his snoring, was diagnosed with mild sleep apnea and referred to Gelb by an ear, nose and throat doctor about four years ago.

"Harry and I were two big snorers," Steven Rothstein told the group. "And now we are back in the bedroom." Major, in trying to find people to attend the party, said he was shocked when calling friends to learn the problem was so prevalent. "Almost every woman I called said, 'How did you know [their husband snored]?'"

Snoring is often connected to sleep apnea, a serious disorder that causes a person to briefly stop breathing. Sleep apnea is estimated to affect 20 million people, Gelb said. Gelb stood before the group, tilted his head back and began to snore quite convincingly. The group paid close attention. Some laughed at the familiar noise. Gelb explained that snoring, when sleep apnea is involved, is not just a noxious noise. "The brain says breathe or die. You startle yourself because your brain wants more oxygen. Sleep apnea is very dangerous." Gelb then took his hand, lifted his jaw and the snoring stopped. That is how The Silencer appliance works, he said.

What are the symptoms of sleep apnea? Daytime fatigue; lack of concentration; a history of falling asleep driving, watching television or reading; awakening during sleep coughing, choking or gasping; morning headaches; cardiovascular disease; and elevated blood pressure, he said. In addition to sleep apnea, people are also more likely to snore as they age or if they gain weight.

There are three treatment options available to deal with snoring or sleep apnea: a CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) machine, surgery and dental appliances that help keep the airway open. The CPAP is considered the gold standard to treat apnea, Gelb said. However, the CPAP machine is cumbersome to travel with, makes some noise and requires a headgear mask with a hose that attaches to one's nose.



Dr. Michael Gelb simulates snoring, a sound this group is familiar with.

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Gelb said many patients can't tolerate the mask or the restricted, closed-in feeling. Some people whose partners use it say the experience is like sleeping with an astronaut. But for Nicholas Syregelas, 58, a Chicago attorney who was diagnosed with sleep apnea two years ago, the CPAP works just fine.

"Before I would wake up at 5:30 a.m. and fall asleep before I got to work," Syregelas said. "This is much better." Syregelas said the mask does take some getting used to. "It's rough. But if I don't use it, I'm immediately tired." Major warned the group about the surgical option based on his experience. "I saw a doctor to consider surgery of the uvula," Major said after he was diagnosed with severe apnea. "He said there are two small risks. He said I might have a whistle when I talk. And when I eat soup and lean forward, it might come out of my nose. And he wasn't kidding." Major didn't try the CPAP but instead chose to fly to New York for an appointment with Gelb. It has been several years, and Major sleeps with the oral device every night. "Lauren [Major's wife] had been complaining for five years," Major told the group. "Now my sleep is incredible, I dream for the first time in years, and it's great for our marriage." Norm Lynn of Highland Park and Terry Goldin of Wilmette liked what they heard. "It makes sense to look into this," Lynn said. Lynn has the CPAP but doesn't like it. Nancy Rothstein said she is thankful The Silencer works for her husband. She no longer walks around exhausted or has to sleep in another room. She said they are careful not to lose the device. (It costs \$2,650 but is sometimes covered by insurance.) "When we travel," Nancy Rothstein said. "I'm in charge."

VARIETY OF TREATMENTS HELP BATTLE SLEEP APNEA

Sleep apnea is considered a medical condition and can be life-threatening, according to Dr. Phyllis Zee, director of the Sleep Disorders Center at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. "Those with sleep apnea are at higher risk of developing high blood pressure and diabetes," Zee said.

Sleep apnea can cause breathing to stop between 10 and 30 times an hour and is diagnosed following a sleep study, Zee said. A sleep study involves observing a patient asleep for eight hours and recording brain waves, breathing, oxygen levels and cardiac rhythms. Zee said the CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) machine is the accepted first line of treatment for those who are diagnosed with severe apnea.

"More important than the severity of the apnea is the cause," Zee said. "If it is caused from the throat area, [a dental appliance] can be quite useful. If it is in the adenoids and tonsils, it may not work." Although much of the medical literature on sleep apnea cautions against the use of oral appliances, Zee said they can work well, even for those with severe apnea. Surgery as a way to cure snoring and sleep apnea has only about a 50 percent success rate, Zee said. Proper diagnosis is most important, Zee said. She said Northwestern Memorial Hospital now has a snoring clinic that offers one stop to see a sleep-medicine specialist; ear, nose and throat doctor; and dentist for evaluation. If warranted, an overnight study is ordered. Treatments are costly but often covered by health insurance.

For more information about Northwestern Memorial Hospital's sleep or snoring clinic, call 312-695-7950 or 312-695-8182. --S.B. -----Dr. Michael Gelb can be reached at 212-752-1661 or at mgelb@gelbcenter.com. A sleep doctor also can be found through the Academy of Dental Sleep Medicine at 708-273-9366. q@tribune.com
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