



# Obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA)

## What is OSA?

Obstructive sleep apnoea, or OSA, is a breathing problem that happens when you sleep. It can affect anyone – men, women or children.

When you're asleep, your throat muscles relax. In some people, a narrower airway means they snore. But if your throat closes completely, you stop breathing for a time. For some people this happens throughout the night and it's called OSA.

OSA disrupts your sleep, making you sleepy during the day. If it's not treated, it can have a big impact on your life. You might feel exhausted when you're awake, and you might doze off at any time – so it's not safe to drive for example. And if you don't get help, it can have a big impact on your health too. We know that lots of people go undiagnosed.

The good news is that there is effective treatment. If you want to find out more for yourself, or this sounds like someone you know, read on.

You'll find out:

- what OSA is

This information is for adults. We also have information about OSA in children at [blf.org.uk/support-for-you](https://www.blf.org.uk/support-for-you).

## What is OSA?

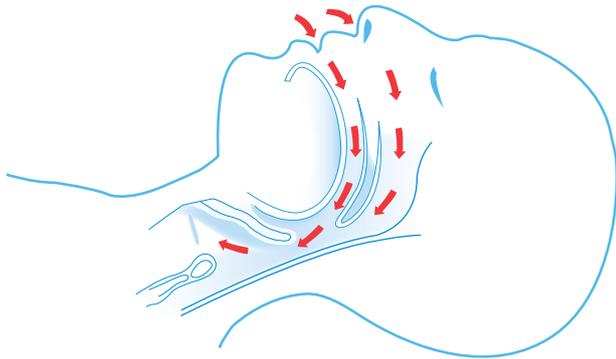
Obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA) is a breathing problem that happens when you sleep. It's called OSA because:

- **Obstructive:** there's an obstruction in the airway
- **Sleep:** it happens when you're asleep
- **Apnoea:** it means you stop breathing

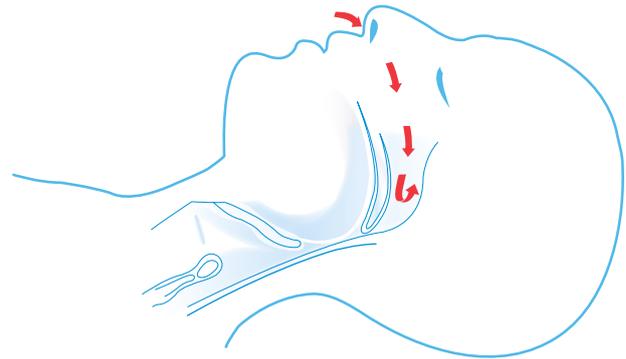
When you go to sleep your muscles relax, including those in your throat. In some people the relaxing muscles cause the airways to narrow. This can reduce the amount of air flowing in and out of your airways. This makes you snore.

If your throat closes completely, you stop breathing for a time. This is called an apnoea if it lasts for 10 seconds or more. If the airways in your throat narrow this is called a hypopnoea. When this happens, there may be a dip in the level of oxygen in your blood. Your brain will start your breathing again. Some people wake up briefly, but others are not aware of what's happening. Breathing often restarts with a gasp or grunt and some movement. You relax again, and the pattern then starts again.

If you have severe OSA, this cycle can happen hundreds of times a night. These frequent arousals disrupt your sleep and so you can feel very sleepy during the day.



In normal breathing, air can travel freely to and from your lungs through your airways during sleep.



In OSA, your airway collapses, stopping air from travelling to and from your lungs, disturbing your sleep.

## What are the symptoms of OSA?

The most common OSA symptoms are:

- snoring
- interrupted breathing while you're asleep
- feeling sleepy when you're awake.

Have a look at the full list of symptoms below – not everyone with OSA will experience all of them. Talk to your GP if you have a combination of daytime and night time symptoms.

### when asleep

- Snoring
- Stopping breathing or struggling to breathe
- Feeling of choking
- Tossing and turning
- Sudden jerky body movements
- Needing to go to the toilet in the night

Sometimes your partner might be more aware of your snoring and pauses in your breathing than you.

### when awake

- Waking up sleepy and unrefreshed
- Headache in the morning
- Difficulty concentrating and feeling groggy, dull and less alert
- Poor memory
- Feeling depressed, irritable or other changes of mood
- Poor co-ordination
- Loss of sex drive
- Heartburn

## Why is it important to diagnose and treat OSA?

OSA can affect your quality of life. It can also lead to other health problems, including high blood pressure, heart attack, stroke and diabetes. You're more likely to have accidents at work and on the road. And your ability to work may be affected.

## Who's affected?

You're more likely to have OSA if:

- you are a man and middle aged
- you are a woman past your menopause
- you are a woman in the later stages of pregnancy. OSA symptoms often improve or disappear after your baby is born
- you are overweight or obese
- a large neck size - 17 inches or more
- you have a small airway, a set-back lower jaw or a small lower jaw, large tonsils, a large tongue or nasal blockage
- you have a medical condition that makes some of these factors more likely such as Down's syndrome

OSA can be made worse by drinking alcohol, using sleeping pills and smoking.

Get in touch with us to find support near you.

Helpline: 03000 030 555

Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm

Ringling our helpline never costs more than a local call and is usually free, even from a mobile.

[helpline@blf.org.uk](mailto:helpline@blf.org.uk)

[blf.org.uk](http://blf.org.uk)

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Registered charity in England and Wales (326730), Scotland (038415) and the Isle of Man (1177)



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We value feedback on our information. To let us know your views, and for the most up to date version of this information and references, call the helpline or visit **[blf.org.uk](http://blf.org.uk)**