

Despite what many people think, snoring affects men and women almost equally — 40 per cent of men will snore, compared with 30 per cent of women.

Snoring is usually caused by the vibration of the soft palate — the bit that flops down between the tonsils at the back of the throat.

Over time, the tissues in the soft palate relax, so it's easier for them to vibrate when air passes over the soft palate as you breathe in.

Being overweight worsens the problem, as the neck has more pressure on it. This constricts the airways, making the airflow faster and vibrations more likely.

Many people find their snoring is worse after drinking alcohol, because you tend to sleep more deeply and the tissues in the soft palate relax more than normal.



Snoring can have devastating effects on relationships. Often, the snorer feels ashamed and is afraid to go to sleep for fear of waking their partner. Holidays are a nightmare, as couples who usually sleep in separate bedrooms have to share.

Losing weight and reducing alcohol intake are the first steps in tackling the problem — surgery is a last resort.

It's also important to identify the cause of the snoring. For most people, the soft palate is to blame — but there are serious conditions associated with snoring to consider, such as obstructive sleep apnoea.

Gum shields can help some people whose snoring is caused by restricted airways; they move the lower jaw and tongue forward to open up the airways. But they won't help those whose snoring is caused by a vibrating soft palate.

Many surgical options involve scarring the soft palate, by using a laser or a radiofrequency device to create thick scar tissue, so the palate can't vibrate as much.

Another option has been physically to reduce the size of the palate by trimming it. The problem with cutting the palate is that food and fluid can go up the nose. And laser treatments for snoring are very painful.

Also, scarring the tissue may not lead to a permanent cure; over time, the scar tissue can break up, allowing snoring to resume.

My preferred option for patients is the Pillar Procedure, which was pioneered in the U.S..

It involves putting three small implants of matchstick-width and less than an inch long, into the soft palate to stiffen it and stop it vibrating.

Imagine the soft palate is a sail flapping in the wind, creating noise. To stop the sail flapping you can make it shorter or put batons in to stiffen it — the latter is what we are doing.

Over time, the tissues around the implants stiffen up, so the palate vibrates less. It is very rare to feel them once they're inserted. They are made from a Goretex-type material called PTFE, which has long been used in heart procedures and is well-tolerated by the body.

Best of all, the procedure usually occurs in an outpatients' room and takes 25 minutes under local anaesthetic. Patients can leave straight away and the implants should last a lifetime.

First, I apply a local anaesthetic spray to the throat. Then I inject each of the implants into the soft palate using a curved, hollow needle. It's like a little gun — the implant is pushed through the needle and into the palate.

We give patients painkillers and they go home. The effects should be seen ten to 12 weeks later.

As this procedure is minimally invasive, it won't work for everyone — it has a success rate of about 75 per cent.

Still, it's a simple and inexpensive option for people who snore loudly — and, of course, their long-suffering partners.