

How wearing stockings could stop you snoring

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Wearing tight stockings during the day may be a new way to tackle snoring at night. Compression stockings are widely used to treat varicose veins and prevent blood clots in the legs after surgery and during long-haul flights.

They are now being given to people with sleep apnoea, a major cause of snoring.



Sleep apnoea triggers a pause in breathing for ten seconds or more before the brain prompts the muscles to reopen the airway. This occurs when the soft tissue in the throat collapses repeatedly at night, blocking air flow into the lungs.

It's thought the knee-length stockings will help reduce this tissue collapse by tackling fluid build-up in the body — a small study of 12 patients has shown the stockings reduce symptoms by a third.

Sleep apnoea affects an estimated one in 25 adults.

It triggers a pause in breathing for ten seconds or more before the brain prompts the muscles to reopen the airway.

This process is accompanied by a loud snore that is then followed by a gasping and spluttering sound.

The condition increases the risk of heart failure, stroke and diabetes. The main treatment is a type of mask called a continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) device that delivers a supply of compressed air during sleep to prevent the airway closing. While these devices can be highly effective, many people find them uncomfortable to wear, and it is estimated around 46 per cent of people given them do not continue to use them.

The idea behind the stockings is that they prevent tissue fluid — a clear liquid that is a constituent of blood — pooling in the legs during the day.

Normally, the leg muscles help pump fluid back up to the body, but this flow is hampered in those with poor circulation or who are largely sedentary. Experts believe an accumulation of this fluid can flow back towards the head when the patient lies down at night.



The fluid then collects around the throat, squeezing the tissue and triggering sleep apnoea.

The theory is that wearing the stockings during the day will squeeze the veins and help the muscles push the fluid back up to the rest of the body.

In a new trial at Toronto University in Canada involving 50 patients, half will wear knee-length stockings during the day for two weeks and the other half will not. Doctors will evaluate the overnight change in leg and neck fluid volumes, levels of daytime sleepiness and alertness, plus overall quality of life.

Commenting on the research, Andrew Mc-Combe, an ear, nose and throat surgeon at Frimley Park Hospital, Surrey, said: 'This is an interesting idea and the hypothesis seems sensible, too. 'Of course, a lot of people with significant apnoea are overweight and not very mobile, so fluid accumulation through the day is more likely in this group.

'Whether the fluid moves to the neck at night when they are asleep is not known for sure, and clearly this idea is untested, hence the need for this study. I would be interested to see the outcome.

'If it is successful, then it is a simple manoeuvre to implement.'

Meanwhile, scientists have revealed that sleep apnoea increases cravings for carbohydrates. U.S. researchers studied 55 patients and found cravings for carbs such as biscuits and bread were twice as likely among those with the condition. Half of the patients had type 2 diabetes, and the research showed that those with diabetes and sleep apnoea have an even greater risk of carb cravings.

Previous research suggested that type 2 sufferers often crave carbs and the scientists wanted to investigate whether this was linked to the sleep condition.

The findings, presented at a recent conference hosted by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, suggests a link.

The researchers were unclear why sleep apnoea would trigger these cravings, but one theory is that waking repeatedly, a characteristic symptom of the condition, can disrupt levels of hormones that regulate hunger.

This could lead to the body craving food that will give a high energy boost, such as bread, sweets and pasta.