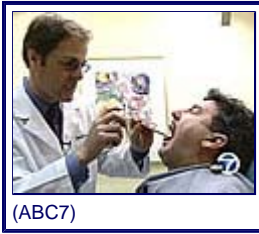


Tiny Implants Offers Hope For Sleep Apnea Sufferers



May 15 (ABC7) — There is new hope for people who snore or suffer from sleep apnea, the medical condition that keeps people from getting a good night's sleep. Tiny new implants are giving people the rest they need.

It is a sound like no other - one difficult to ignore for millions of people and their loved ones. Snoring means a poor night's sleep.

Rick Allen, snoring patient: "Basically it started about a year ago, where I was waking up more and more tired."

Bob, snoring patient: "During the daytime I was always tired, so I knew I wasn't sleeping at nighttime."

And like many who snore, these men suffer from sleep apnea. While observing the condition, one sleep lab patient actually stops breathing when excess throat tissue flops down and blocks his airway for seconds at a time until he gasps for air.

Bob, snoring patient: "My wife noticed that during the night in the last couple years it sounded like I was gasping for air or even stopped breathing."

Doctors now take sleep apnea very seriously.

Michael Macdonald, M.D., SF facial plastic surgeon: "What the main issue is, is that it contributes to heart disease and specifically to congestive heart failure."

There are a variety of ways to treat snoring and sleep apnea: surgery to cut away part of the soft palate, heating and shrinking the excess throat tissue, or an unwieldy device called a C-PAP, which forces air down the throat to keep the airway open.

Rick tried the C-PAP.

Rick Allen, snoring patient: "I didn't adjust to that at all. Couldn't stay with it."

Well now there's a new treatment option for both sleep problems, called the Pillar Procedure, which uses a tiny braided polymer implant.

Michael Macdonald, M.D., SF facial plastic surgeon: "What we do is put three of them in parallel, and what they do is they sit in the soft palate and stiffen it so it can't vibrate anymore."

After spraying an anesthetic at the back of Bob's throat, San Francisco facial plastic surgeon Dr. Michael Macdonald uses a topical numbing gel which will be followed by a Novocain shot. That's all the surgery preparation necessary.

Each implant is loaded on the top of spring applicator. Then Dr. Macdonald carefully places them one at a time in the soft tissue at the roof of the mouth.

Michael Macdonald, M.D., SF facial plastic surgeon: "They cause an inflammatory response, so that the palette stiffens beyond the actual implants themselves. It stiffens all the way along."

Bob should begin noticing a little improvement in a few days, but it will take about three months to get the full effect. Surprisingly, in less than ten minutes the entire procedure is done.

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Rick is a few weeks post-op, and already sees a difference.

Rick Allen, snoring patient: "I am having more energy in the morning when I wake up, and the quality of my sleep has improved."

And with his snoring stopped, his loved ones should sleep better too.

Doctors say the critical part of this is selecting the right patient. These implants don't work well in patients with very thin or small palates, or in very obese patients with lots of extra throat tissue.

Experts can easily see if you have sleep apnea with a simple home test. But they do say none of the various treatments for snoring and sleep apnea work for everyone.

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