

MINDING THE SNORE

By Piper Weiss

February 21, 2006 -- If snoring is forcing you and your sweetheart to sleep in separate rooms, it may be time to take action. And increasingly, that action is surgery.

The Pillar procedure is a new treatment for snoring and, though technically surgery, it takes no more than an hour at the doctor's office.

Local specialist Dr. Charles Kimmelman, associate professor at the Weill Cornell College of Medicine and chief of smell and taste disorders at Manhattan Eye, Ear & Throat Hospital, says 81 percent of patients who've undergone the Pillar procedure have reported a reduction in snoring.

To understand it, you have to know what causes snoring in the first place. In many cases, snoring occurs because in deep sleep, throat muscles relax and cause the soft palate — the skin at the back of the mouth that includes the tonsils and the uvula — to flutter. A person who actually stops breathing during the snore could have sleep apnea, a chronic condition in which breathing is briefly suspended repeatedly during sleep.

The Pillar procedure involves inserting three 1-inch-long batons into the soft palate area. Scar tissue then forms around the insertions, causing the tissue to harden. A nonmoving soft palate equals a night of peaceful Z's.



A new medical procedure involves inserting inch-long implants into the soft palate. Scar tissue hardens the palate, reducing the fluttering that causes snoring. This may reduce the need for desperate home remedies like the one above.

"The palate is like a sail fluttering in the breeze, so it makes sense that if put something in it, like batons in a sail, you can stiffen it and stop it from moving," Kimmelman explains.

The batons are made of Dacron, a synthetic material commonly used in medicine and by all accounts, after implantation they're unnoticeable.

"Once it's in, the person doesn't feel it," says Kimmelman, comparing the 20-minute procedure to "going to the dentist." The injection is as painful as a Novocain shot, and most people report a sore throat for two days after the injection.

"It feels like eating a hot pizza and burning the roof of your mouth at first," continues Kimmelman, who follows up with five days of antibiotics and a few checkups down the road.

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Although most people experience a significant benefit from the Pillar, there's about a 1 percent chance of "extrusion," which means the body rejects the cylinders and they begin to come out on their own. Put aside any notion of choking on a snore pin, however — no major complications have yet arisen as a result. The procedure, approved for adults by the Food and Drug Administration in 2004, has not yet been approved for children.

The whole shebang costs about \$2,500, but according to former snorer Steve Singer, it's worth it.

"I used to wake myself up gasping for air, but since I got the procedure, I don't at all." Before the Pillar procedure, Singer, 36, an Internet marketing executive from Manhattan, used to "snore his brains out."

He'd already tried the most successful sleep-apnea treatment, a continuous positive airway pressure, or C-PAP, mask. The medieval-looking contraption is worn over the nose and hooked up to a tube that delivers pressurized air the keeps open airways during sleep.

Although the device appears to work, people tend to dislike it. According to Kimmelman, "Most people liken it to [equipment for] a fighter pilot. Studies show at least half the people who use it have abandoned it after one year."

Count Singer among them. The bulky, unattractive mask didn't mesh with his bachelor lifestyle. "It was unromantic to say the least," he says.

Other snore remedies have similar baggage, while some are downright painful. Surgical procedures involve lasers, electricity and chemical injections that scar the tissue behind the roof of the mouth have been used to treat snoring — but all are painful and require a week or two of exhaustive recovery. Even worse, none is 100 percent effective.

A less painful alternative is a dental appliance. Worn like a mouth guard, "It holds your lower jaw in a forward position while you sleep to expand back of your throat," explains Dr. Andrew Tucker, a New York-based, sleep-disorder specialist. Its success rate however varies from patient to patient.

Home remedies like sewing tennis balls onto the back of pajamas (to avoid sleeping on the back) or using nasal strips and decongestive sprays may help temporarily, but for long-term help, the Pillar procedure appears to be most promising.

While it's still new to the medical world, according to Kimmelman, it's only getting better. "They're working to improve versions of it." ■

Visit Dr. Kimmelman's website at www.stopsnoringnewyork.com