

BROADCAST SCRIPT-Have Sleep Apnea? A mouth guard might be all you need

Anyone with sleep apnea knows schlepping a CPAP machine onto a plane is never fun. The only consolation is that it's a medical device so it doesn't count as a carry-on. But, there is an alternative for some patients with mild to moderate cases of [sleep apnea](#) – a condition that affects an estimated 22 million Americans.

Dr. Kaninika (kuh-NEE-NUH-kuh) Verma, clinical director of Sleep Medicine for OSF HealthCare, says sleep apnea can be mild, moderate or severe based on the number of breathing lapses within one minute. For those with mild or moderate cases, a mouth guard might be a good alternative, especially for those who have difficulty using a CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) machine which can be noisy and uncomfortable.

Dr. Verma says a mouth guard, created by a dentist, can force the airway open by adjusting the lower jaw forward.

SOT- Dr. Kaninika Verma, director of Sleep Medicine for OSF HealthCare

“So that it actually opens up the back of the airway more to see if it can stay open, even when the airway is collapsing.” (:10)

It can take a few adjustments for comfort and to make sure the mouth guard is working the way it should.

SOT- Dr. Kaninika Verma, director of Sleep Medicine for OSF HealthCare

“Once the dentist fits the mouthpiece and makes the adjustment, we just do another sleep study with the mouthpiece to document the treatment. So of course, once the sleep study is done (and it's determined) ‘Hey you're doing good,’ then every time the patient sleeps they'll have to wear that mouthpiece,” according to Dr. Verma. (:20)

In [a study](#) that looked at 349 patients using a mouth guard, two-thirds of the patients said it was comfortable and it was effective in correcting their dysfunctional breathing.

In some cases, patients who are pilots or truckers with sleep apnea have to provide proof they are successfully being treated. While a CPAP machine can collect data on when and how long it has been used, Dr. Verma says technology for mouth guards hasn't evolved to a reliable level.

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“On a mouthpiece there's really no way of following compliance, meaning if you're using it or not. There has been some headway into getting some of these mouthpieces to document use but it's not been very robust or been used a lot with a mouth guard.” (:20)

The other challenge with using a mouth guard can be recognizing when it is no longer working. Dr. Verma says in some cases, the mouth piece is no longer the best line of defense.

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“So a lot of them have gone back on CPAP or some of them we've said, ‘No your mouthpiece is working. Let's look at something else and work with your primary care physicians or other doctors to see why you're so tired during the day.’” (:15)

For some people surgery is the best option. A new outpatient procedure that involves an implant that can be activated upon sleep is also available for patients who meet certain criteria.

If you're having trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, Dr. Verma says it's important to get evaluated to rule out breathing issues which can lead to serious health complications.