

# What an Airhead!

*Sleep apnea solutions from the Michigan Head & Neck Institute*

Understanding sleep apnea — and why it's so dangerous — is a little easier now, thanks to an innovative model called the "Airhead," created by Dr. Richard Klein, director of the Michigan Head & Neck Institute. Perhaps it's so easy to warm up to this familiar-looking invention because the device is reminiscent of the puzzles we played with during childhood.

With its bright colors and funny-sounding name, Airhead was created for use in serious demonstrations — although, at times, the demonstration seems more like play. When the Airhead's profile is tilted to a resting position, his jaws and the walls of his throat collapse into the harmful sleep apnea position; the doctor then inserts a functional mouthpiece, opening a passageway so that air can flow freely through the mouth and windpipe. In reality, the mouthpiece is small, transparent, and less conspicuous than the one inserted into the Airhead model.

"I am a visual person, and I understand how many individuals can grasp a concept by visualizing it," Dr. Klein says. "That's why I originally designed the model, to help my patients understand the control that can be provided for their sleep apnea."

Sleep apnea is characterized by intense snoring, followed by long pauses between breaths, then feverish gasps for air, a snort, and sometimes a sudden awakening. Although it affects both men and women, it's more commonly found in men (80 percent of sufferers are men, 20 percent are women). "This is because even though we have much the same volume in our throats as women, men are generally taller — so our air pipes are taller and thinner. This makes it easier for our windpipes to collapse on themselves," Dr. Klein explains.

While it's true that the problem is widely found in tall, thin people, as the overall population has gained weight, sleep apnea is affecting overweight people more frequently. "If you're overweight, the easiest way to treat your sleep apnea is to lose 15 pounds," Dr.



Klein says. "But if you can't lose the pounds and you find a CPAP device claustrophobic and/or not easily portable, then this small appliance keeps your airway open so that you can breathe freely all night long."

Incidentally, it turns out that grandmother was right: You need to get a good night's sleep. According to recent studies, even with eight to nine hours of continuous sleep, the brain doesn't get enough oxygen to replenish its cells if apnea exists. Lack of sleep makes people more irritable and forgetful, and it also contributes to serious life-threatening diseases like diabetes, depression, cancer, stroke, and heart disease. That's a lot of risk, and it can be minimized by

a simple, small, and comfortable mouthpiece.

TMJ, the misalignment of the jaw formally called Temporomandibular Joint Dysfunction, also can contribute to many of the same wellness issues. Like sleep apnea, TMJ is found in both men and women. TMJ, however, is seen more often in women. Symptoms often include headaches or pain in the jaw. Some people also experience ear pain, dizziness, and blurriness of the eyes. Many people hear a click when they open their mouth to eat or chew, or they grind their teeth.

A mouthpiece that's similar to the sleep apnea device can be custom-created to effectively control TMJ. It, too, is worn at night, and it's small and transparent. "If you're dating, are constantly traveling, or are someone who likes the rugged outdoors, a mouthpiece definitely has advantages over the CPAP, which requires electricity," Dr. Klein says.

As for the Airhead, Dr. Klein invites interested parties to schedule an appointment to view the model at the Michigan Head & Neck Institute, in hopes that it will encourage sleep apnea-affected individuals to understand and take action before they do irreparable harm to their bodies.

*The red, white, and blue Airhead is truly an American creation — conceived, designed, and patented by*

*Dr. Klein and produced in the United States — putting Americans to work at a time when work is so badly needed, and helping other sleep and health professionals educate their patients.*

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