

Avoiding sleeping on your back

Sleeping on your back changes the shape of your airway, making it narrower from front to back.

If you have obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA), your airway is more likely to block off when you sleep on your back. When your airway blocks off, you stop breathing (apnoea), which interrupts your sleep, making you feel unrefreshed and sleepy.

Sleeping on your back is also called supine sleep.



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Many people sleep on their backs and have difficulty staying on their sides or front while they sleep. It's very common for people to manage to fall asleep on their side or front but find that they've rolled onto their back during the night.

There are several strategies to stop yourself rolling onto your back while you sleep.

Sleep position trainer (vibratory feedback device)

This is a band that goes around your chest or neck and detects which position you're in. When it detects that you're on your back, it vibrates until you change position. With time, you get used to avoiding sleeping on your back. Available devices include Night Shift, NightBalance and BuzzPOD.

Tennis ball technique

A tennis ball is either sewn into the back of your bed clothes (over your spine) or fastened to your back with a strap or belt. This makes sleeping on your back uncomfortable and with time you avoid sleeping on your back altogether.

The New Zealand Respiratory & Sleep Institute (www.nzrsi.co.nz) sells a similar device called Snore Belt.

There's also an American device called Zzoma available from www.zzomaosa.com.

Written by a Canterbury DHB respiratory specialist. Adapted by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Last reviewed October 2022.