

Patients are even encouraged to bring their own pillow.

Before going to bed, the patient watches a 15-minute video explaining exactly what the night will entail.

Next a technician arrives and two dozen sensors, which are small metal discs called electrodes, are applied to the patient's head and body using an adhesive.

"It's completely painless," Grealish said.

The sensors monitor the activities that go on in the body during sleep – brain waves, muscle movement, eye movement, breathing, snoring, heart rate, and leg movements.

Elastic belts around the chest and abdomen measure breathing.

A clip on the finger or earlobe measures oxygen in the blood.

The wires are bunched together like a ponytail and connected to a machine that feeds a computer outside the room.

"People feel they won't be able to sleep in a strange place with all the wires on them, but most of the time, they can," Grealish said.

After the patient is hooked up, the technician quietly closes the door and sets up watch for the night at the computer.

For eight hours, the machine records every brain wave, every breath, every heartbeat, and every body movement.

By morning when the patient awakes, the computer is ready to print 800 pages of data, an in-depth profile of the patient's sleep patterns.

The patient has a light breakfast and goes on his way, waiting for the results of the sleep report and a treatment plan.

Jay Peabody, 35, a technician, attended the center two years ago.

"I had just gotten married," he said. "My snoring was really bothering my wife. It was keeping her awake at night.

"My doctor suggested the sleep center.

"I was really skeptical, but I figured I'd try it. I didn't know what to expect."

Peabody was surprised at the level of comfort and friendliness he found.

"I brought my own pajamas," he said. "The technician hooked me up to the sensors. When I went to bed, I didn't think I'd be able to sleep, but I did, although it was a light sleep because I was away from home.

"I expected a hospital bed, but it was a really comfortable one."

After Peabody was sleeping for about two hours, the technician noticed his interrupted breathing, which is called apnea.

She brought Peabody a pressurized mask to put over his nose, which alleviated his struggle to breathe.

"I used it the rest of the night," Peabody said. "In the morning, I showered, ate, and went right to work. Within a week, a report on my sleep disorder was sent to my doctor and I was given a mask. It was completely paid for by insurance. I have been using it every since. I don't snore any more, and the apnea is under control.

"The mask doesn't bother me. It's surprising. It's just like putting on my socks.

"My father also has sleep apnea. He wears a full mask every night.

"Within three weeks, I was feeling so much better. I had more energy. I didn't fall asleep in the afternoon any more. I felt great."

Sleep apnea is a common sleep disorder, Grealish said.

Loud snoring can be a sign that there is something seriously wrong with breathing.

"Snoring indicates that the breathing pathway in the throat is not fully open, and the snoring comes from trying to force air through this narrowed area," she said.

The muscles that stiffen and open the throat relax during sleep. This relaxation leads to slight narrowing of the throat that is not a problem for most people.

However, for those with apnea, the narrowing of the passage is so great that breathing becomes difficult.

"It's as if they were breathing through a floppy straw," a booklet by the Sleep Health Center said.

The brain senses that breathing is difficult and increases the effort to breathe. This increased effort awakens the brain.

This sleeping and awakening can happen hundreds of times each night.

Warning signs of apnea are excessive snoring, gasping, falling asleep at the wrong time, trouble in concentration, and morning headaches or nausea.

There are as many individualized treatments as there are patients, Grealish said.

In general, patients with sleep apnea is encouraged to stay at ideal body weight, avoid alcohol within four hours of bedtime, keep away from sleeping pills which depress breathing and relax throat muscles, and sleep on one side or on the stomach.

Patients can also opt for positive airway pressure therapy.

"A light mask is worn over the nose or over the nose and mouth during sleep. An air pump is attached to the mask." Grealish said. "Pressured air from the room enters the nose and throat and holds the air passage open so you don't get blockages."

Approximately 60 to 70 percent of patients who try PAP are able to continue to use it.

The masks come in different sizes, shapes, and textures for different faces.

"It is not a cure. It is a treatment. It will have to be worn every night," Grealish said. "Some people find it as easy as wearing eyeglasses. PAP is the most common treatment for sleep apnea in the country."

Dental devices can also be used for sleep apnea.

"These realign the jaw to maximize the airway," Grealish said.

Physical problems that interfere with breathing during sleep can be corrected surgically.

"Sometimes removing tissue in the airways helps," Grealish said.

Problems can include enlarged tonsils or adenoids, nasal polyps, or other growths.

Insomnia is the most common sleep disorder.

Trouble falling asleep or staying asleep plagues one in three adult Americans.

Insomnia can occur in people of all ages, usually just for a night or two, but sometimes for weeks, months, or even years.

It is most common among women and older adults.

Transient insomnia is the inability to sleep well from a few nights to less than four weeks.

This type of sleep disorder is usually brought on by excitement or stress.

Short-term insomnia can last from four weeks to six months of poor sleep, due to ongoing stress.

When the stressful situation eases, sleep usually returns to normal.

Chronic insomnia involves poor sleep for over six months.
More than 20 million Americans suffer from the affliction.

According to a nationwide study by the Association of Sleep Disorders, though worry is a part of the condition, physical ailments, such as disorders of breathing or muscle activity, are often mistaken for insomnia and may account for a large number of self-diagnosed cases.

Chronic insomnia is a symptom of another problem, like a fever or a stomachache.

It can be caused by any number of factors – stress, use of stimulants like caffeine, nicotine, or alcohol, erratic hours, inactive behavior, or misuse of sleeping pills.

"Everyone is different. We go on a case by case basis and give them options," Grealish said. "We suggest that patients get to their ideal body weight for their overall health and their sleep health."

“Our services are pretty favorable. We can usually help people sleep better,” said Dr. Roger Smith, director of the Weymouth Sleep Health Center.

Smith was drawn to the practice of sleep medicine because he wanted “to help people as much as I can,” he said.

The field requires many disciplines, including cardio vascular training, psychiatry, and internal medicine.

“People are more aware of sleep disorders now. We are learning more and more about them. In the early 1980s, there were not a lot of options,” Smith said.

Then came the invention of the air compressor machine.

Through the years, the masks have been made more comfortable with different materials and designed to fit different face types.

“In small percentages, people who think they have insomnia really have sleep apnea,” Smith said.

“Insomnia usually involves a whole lot of reasons.

“Sleep disorders are sometimes regarded as ‘it’s just stress’ or ‘I’m getting older.’

“Sleep medicine can be very effective with a non-medication approach. Most of the problems are very treatable. Patients can see a significant difference in their quality of life.

“We would like to raise awareness of sleep disorders. We are available to help.”

Untreated sleep disorders can lead to serious health problems like high blood pressure, diabetes, heart attacks, strokes, and even automobile accidents.

“All of us have enough risk factors in life,” Smith said. “Anything we can do to limit them is a good idea.”