

# I've Started Taping My Mouth Shut Before I Go to Sleep— And I Can't Stop Talking About It

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"I was certain that, pregnancy aside (when I could smell everything and it all smelled awful), I was safe among the nose breathers. Until I read that waking up thirsty is a sign of nocturnal mouth breathing."

Photo: Getty Images

This is how pillow talk with my husband sounds these days:

*Anthony: “Did you hear about [news item that has just broken]?”*

*Me: “Nnfffn.”*

*Anthony: “Is [recently stirring daughter] asleep?”*

*Me: “Mmmffn.”*

Why do I sound like I am answering him from the bottom of the sea? Well, because my mouth is taped shut.

He might then use his teeth to rip off a piece of medical tape from the roll beside the bed. By the time our four-year-old crawls in between us at 3 a.m., we look like a pair of hostages. She is unfazed; this has been going on for some time.

I should probably clarify that our tastes do not run to strait-laced by day and even more tightly trussed by night, à la Chuck and Wendy Rhoades from *Billions*. (Not yet, anyway.) No, this is about something even more fundamental: Breathing. We are trying to train ourselves to breathe exclusively through our noses while we sleep.

The human nose filters, warms, humidifies, and pressurizes air, readying it for the lungs and bloodstream. It is lined with sensors that, when activated by breath, send messages throughout the nervous system. Bypassing the nose to gulp air through the mouth (easier; satisfying), has unsavory long-term effects, and the more you do it, the harder it becomes to stop.

You may wish to interject at this point and ask: Isn't breathing automatic? Don't you have a respiratory center at the base of your brain that handles the ins and outs so you can just relax, no adhesives necessary? My mouth is still taped shut, so I will simply make a “RRMMM” noise, and point to James Nestor's book *Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art*.

Initially, I was reluctant to read *Breath*. It spent 18 weeks as a *New York Times* bestseller and was shortlisted for the 2021 Royal Society Science Book

Prize, but still it activated the skepticism sensors lining my nostrils. From a distance it smelled, to my perfectly-functional-thank-you nose, like pseudoscience. But after Anthony read it, I watched him order a multi-pack of 3M Durapore™ cloth tape and figured the time had come to get involved. To confirm that a book is full of nonsense, it is after all useful to first read it.

*Breath* reads as an immersive first-person quest to understand how humans have lost the ability to breathe properly—and what we can do about it. Nestor, a journalist, infiltrates the world of “pulmonauts” (self-directed breathing researchers), and becomes one. He allows the chief of rhinology research at Stanford’s Head and Neck Surgery Center to plug up his nostrils with silicone for ten days to find out what happens when you mouth breathe (sleep apnea; snoring; high blood pressure; misery). He shimmies into forbidden tunnels of Paris’s catacombs to examine the shrunken mouths and crooked teeth of human skulls from the early 1800s, and compares them with the larger nasal apertures, stronger jaws, and straight teeth of their pre-industrial counterparts to see first-hand how lifestyle changes like ever-more-processed food have shriveled our airways.

He wears a mouth-expanding retainer every night for a year and measurably increases the bone mass of his own skull—a feat many doctors call impossible. In a scene reminiscent of the film *Dazed and Confused*, he hyperventilates on a yoga mat in a park while a man called Chuck McGee III, with “a sandy bowl cut...and cargo shorts that dangle just a few inches above white socks,” shouts: “Expression is the opposite of depression!”

Critics have poked holes, including Sam Kean, who argues in the *Wall Street Journal* that Nestor does not adequately evaluate the role of the placebo effect, and that he may be inhaling some hot air from his pulmonauts. These charges, however, do not weaken the book’s central point: Humans have evolved to become the worst breathers in the animal kingdom. Yes, breathing is automatic, but many of us are automatically breathing badly and it is hurting our health.

“Mouth breather” has been synonymous with “not the sharpest crayon” since at least 1915, so naturally I did not rush to put myself in that box. I was

certain that, pregnancy aside (when I could smell everything and it all smelled awful), I was safe among the nose breathers. Until I read that waking up thirsty is a sign of nocturnal mouth breathing. This made my nostrils twitch. I tried a small piece of tape one night in November, just to be sure. I snipped off a careful square and placed it loosely over my mouth, like a soul patch an inch too high. More of a reminder than a sealant.

The first night was torture. I kept the tape on for ten minutes before ripping it off. (This felt surprisingly good, like pulling off a Bioré strip in the early 2000s.) Denial was no longer possible: I was aching to mouth breathe.

The next few nights were progressively easier. I misplaced the scissors and learned to rip tape from the roll with my teeth like the strong-jawed cavewoman I was hoping to become. Before long, the tape was comforting. As with an eye mask that blocks not only light but potential light, I started to find the underwater feeling of sleeping close-mouthed peaceful, like a mermaid might.

Then I caught a cold and the tape made me feel like I was being buried alive, so I stopped for two weeks. By the time the roads were travel-able, Anthony declared that he was officially a night-time nose breather. This irked me. He already has the muscle composition of an elite athlete, according to 23andMe; I was not about to let his toned and fit nasal passages age gracefully while my own inner nose atrophied. So, I got stuck back in.

Successive lockdowns made it easy to keep our taping habits to ourselves, until a lull between surges landed us at a dinner party with business friends. Anthony is usually discreet (I am the one who sometimes yearns for mouth tape in social situations), so I was alarmed to overhear him say, “You should see us in bed.” Silence fell. Heads turned. Confession ensued.

The next day, I told my friend Monica on our podcast, Fanfare. She was appalled by my secret. When the episode aired, so was everyone else. My first boss James texted that he couldn’t get the “disturbing image” of us lying in bed with our mouths taped shut out of his mind. “Friends don’t want friends to mouth-breathe!!” I texted back, typing hard.

And we don't. Which is why I am ripping off the tape to tell you this. If it gives you night terrors, I am sorry. If, however, it leaves you sleeping as soundly and silently as our pre-industrial ancestors, I invite you to murmur and point in my direction.