

The Care and Cleaning of your PAP Device

Positive airway pressure therapy (PAP) is used during sleep to treat obstructive sleep apnea (OSA). These devices work by blowing pressurized air through a mask or nasal pillows into the air passages. This helps to keep the air passages from collapsing, allowing for better breathing during sleep. Many people have a humidifier attached to the device to help keep the air moist and avoid drying out the nose passages. Since air is being blown directly into your air passages, it is important to keep the PAP device and its supplies clean.



The purpose of this fact sheet is to offer tips on the care and cleaning of your PAP device and supplies. (For more information on OSA and PAP therapy, go to the ATS patient information series at www.thoracic.org/patients.)

What parts do I need to clean?

You will need to clean the PAP device, humidifier chamber, tubing, and mask or nasal pillows. Air filters for the PAP device may need to be replaced and/or cleaned on a regular basis as well.

When and how do I clean my PAP device and supplies?

The PAP device and supplies should be cleaned with warm soapy water using mild dish detergent or baby shampoo or a mixture of equal parts white vinegar and water. After washing, rinse thoroughly with fresh warm water and allow to air dry away from direct sunlight or heat. Additional care instructions are listed in the Table below.

PAP device—After unplugging the power cord, wipe the outside of the device with a soft cloth on a weekly basis to remove any dirt or dust. Some manufacturers recommend a damp cloth while others recommend a dry cloth. Do not place the device in water.

Humidifier chamber—Every day, empty the distilled water from the humidifier chamber. Have a routine. Empty it when you wake up from sleep and refill

the chamber with fresh distilled water before you go to sleep again. Always use distilled water in the chamber to avoid any mineral deposits or build-up in the chamber or PAP device. Once a week, wash the humidifier chamber. Do not place the chamber in direct sunlight or expose it to a lot of heat to dry it, as the chamber could warp or crack. Some chambers are top rack dishwasher safe, but you must check the manufacturer's cleaning instructions carefully first.

Tubing—Once a week you should wash and rinse the tubing. After cleaning, hang the tubing over a towel rack or shower curtain rod to thoroughly air dry.

Mask—Every day, wipe the cushion or nasal pillows with a damp cloth and a mild detergent to remove any body oil, sweat, or debris that may have built up while you were wearing it. There are mask cleaning wipes you can buy that are designed for use with PAP masks and nasal pillows and are safe to use. Baby wipes or household cleaning wipes are not recommended to use on your cushion or pillows. Once a week, you should take the whole mask or nasal pillows apart and wash, rinse, and air dry the mask before putting it back together.

Headgear—Once a week, remove the headgear from the PAP mask or nasal pillows and hand wash it. Do not wash your headgear in a washing machine. You should then rinse and air dry the headgear before putting it back on the mask.

Part	Frequency of Care and Cleaning			How to Clean	Rinse	Air Dry
	Daily	Weekly	Monthly			
Humidifier Chamber	Empty and refill chamber with distilled water	Clean		Warm soapy water or equal parts vinegar and water	Fresh warm water	Yes- out of direct sunlight and/or heat
Cushion/Pillows	Clean with damp cloth and mild detergent; may use mask wipes	Clean		Warm soapy water or equal parts vinegar and water	Fresh warm water	Yes- out of direct sunlight and/or heat
Mask		Clean		Warm soapy water or equal parts vinegar and water	Fresh warm water	Yes- out of direct sunlight and/or heat
Headgear		Clean		Warm soapy water	Fresh warm water	Yes- out of direct sunlight and/or heat
Tubing		Clean		Warm soapy water or equal parts vinegar and water	Fresh warm water	Yes- hang over towel rack or shower curtain rod
Sponge Filter		Clean		Warm soapy water	Fresh warm water; squeeze out excess water	Yes
Disposable (paper) Filter			Replace	Not needed	Not needed	Not needed
PAP Device		Clean		Wipe outside with soft (or damp) cloth	No	Yes (if needed)

Filters—Some older PAP devices have a reusable pollen filter that looks like a small foam sponge. This should be washed once a week. After rinsing, excess water should be squeezed out of the filter, it should be allowed to air dry. The ultrafine white paper filter should not be washed. This filter is disposable and should be replaced monthly or more often if it looks dusty or dirty.

How do the commercially available PAP sanitizing devices work?

There are PAP sanitizing devices you can buy to help clean your equipment. These work by using ozone or ultraviolet (UV) light to clean the PAP supplies. Although these devices are convenient, they are not necessarily medically superior to the cleaning methods described above. It is very important to carefully follow the manufacturer’s instructions for proper use.

What happens if I don’t clean my PAP device?

If you do not clean your PAP device and supplies, bacteria and mold may begin to grow. This may put you at higher risk for getting sick. Your device and supplies may be more likely to break down earlier if not kept clean. You may notice the device or mask starting to smell bad as well.

Author: Helena Schotland, MD

Reviewers: Marianna Sockrider MD, DrPH, Iris Perez, MD

Rx Action Steps

- ✓ Check the manufacturer’s instructions for cleaning recommendations.
- ✓ Do not use bleach, rubbing alcohol, or harsh chemicals to clean your PAP device or supplies.
- ✓ Always use distilled water in your PAP humidifier chamber.
- ✓ Consider having a back-up mask and tubing set so you can rotate while one is drying.

Healthcare Provider’s Contact Number:

Resources

American Thoracic Society
 • www.thoracic.org/patients

American Academy of Sleep Medicine
 • <http://sleepeducation.org/>

National Sleep Foundation
 • <https://www.sleepfoundation.org/sleep-disorders>

This information is a public service of the American Thoracic Society. The content is for educational purposes only. It should not be used as a substitute for the medical advice of one’s healthcare provider.

