

Oral Appliance Therapy and Inspire: CPAP Alternatives

If you can't tolerate CPAP, a custom oral appliance or hypoglossal nerve stimulation (Inspire) can treat obstructive sleep apnea; each has specific eligibility criteria and insurance rules.

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CPAP is the most effective treatment for obstructive sleep apnea, but only if you use it. If you've genuinely tried and can't tolerate it, there are proven alternatives.

Oral appliance therapy

A **mandibular advancement device** is a custom mouthpiece that holds the lower jaw slightly forward to keep the airway open.

- **Who it suits:** adults with mild to moderate OSA, or those with any severity who can't tolerate CPAP, per AASM and AADSM guidance.
- **Made by:** a dentist trained in dental sleep medicine, based on a physician's diagnosis and prescription.
- **Adjustment:** the device is advanced gradually, then a follow-up sleep test confirms it works.
- **Coverage:** often billed to medical insurance, not dental. Medicare covers custom devices (E0486) through enrolled DME suppliers.
- **Side effects:** jaw soreness, tooth movement, bite changes.

Hypoglossal nerve stimulation (Inspire)

Inspire is an implanted device that stimulates the nerve controlling the tongue, moving it forward with each breath during sleep.

Typical eligibility:

- Moderate to severe OSA (AHI roughly 15–100)
- CPAP failure or intolerance
- BMI limits set by labeling and payer policy (many insurers still use 32–35)
- A drug-induced sleep endoscopy (DISE) showing no complete concentric collapse at the soft palate
- Adults, with an indication for adolescents with Down syndrome

The procedure is outpatient, the device is turned on about a month later, and a titration study fine-tunes it.

Other options

- Positional therapy for position-dependent apnea
- Weight loss, including medications now approved for OSA in adults with obesity
- Nasal or airway surgery
- Treating nasal congestion to improve CPAP tolerance

Next steps

Document every CPAP attempt, including masks, pressure changes and duration. Insurers want that history before approving any alternative.

Frequently asked questions

Do I need to fail CPAP before getting Inspire?

Yes. Inspire is indicated for people who have tried and failed or cannot tolerate CPAP, and insurers require documentation of that attempt.

Are over-the-counter mouthguards the same as an oral appliance?

No. Medical guidelines recommend a custom-made, titratable appliance fitted by a qualified dentist. Boil-and-bite devices are not equivalent and are usually not covered.

Will I need another sleep study after starting an alternative?

Usually yes. A follow-up study confirms the appliance or implant is controlling your sleep apnea at the chosen setting.