

CPAP Cleaning and Maintenance

A Practical Routine That Keeps Your Therapy Working and Your Airway Safe

CPAP therapy works only as well as the equipment delivering it. A device that's been treated like a hairdryer (set up once, dusted occasionally, otherwise ignored) gradually accumulates bacteria, mold, mineral deposits, and skin oils inside the parts that touch your face and your airway. Over time, this can degrade therapy quality, irritate the skin around the mask, and in some cases cause real respiratory infections.

Cleaning takes about five minutes a day plus a slightly more involved once-weekly routine, and replacing parts on schedule is mostly a matter of remembering when. This guide covers what to clean, how often, what to replace, and the few cleaning shortcuts worth avoiding. The same routine applies whether you use CPAP for adult sleep apnea, your child uses it for pediatric obstructive sleep apnea, or a family member uses bilevel therapy at night.

Why Cleaning Matters

Your CPAP system pushes a continuous stream of air across surfaces inside the device, through the humidifier chamber and tubing, and through a mask that touches your face for six to nine hours a night. Each contact point becomes a place where moisture, skin cells, and microbes can collect. The two most common consequences of inadequate cleaning are skin issues and respiratory issues.

Skin problems start as redness, mild dermatitis, or breakout-like irritation where the cushion sits on the face. They tend to resolve quickly with proper cleaning and a well-fitting mask. Left unaddressed, irritated skin can become a real infection.

Respiratory problems are less common but more serious. A device or circuit colonized by bacteria, mold spores, or fungi delivers those particles directly into your airway with every breath. Sinus infections, sore throat, persistent cough, and lower-respiratory infections including pneumonia have been reported in patients with poorly maintained equipment. Rates remain low overall, but they aren't zero.

Daily Cleaning

About five minutes each morning, ideally as part of your wake-up routine, while you can still see the night's residue clearly:

- **Mask cushion and frame.** Wipe with a soft cloth and warm water, or with a CPAP-specific wipe. For a deeper clean, hand-wash in mild, unscented soap and warm water. Rinse thoroughly. Air-dry on a clean towel out of direct sunlight.
- **Humidifier chamber.** Empty any leftover water. Rinse with warm water. Refill only with distilled water for the next night, never tap. Tap water leaves mineral deposits that build up quickly and shorten the chamber's life.
- **Mask seal check.** While the cushion is in your hands, look for cracks, stiffness, or shape changes. A cushion that no longer holds its form is leaking, even if you can't hear it.

Wash your face before putting the mask on at night. Skin oils and lotions are the biggest reason cushions degrade faster than expected.

Weekly Cleaning

Once a week, take the system apart and wash everything that gets wet:

- **Tubing.** Disconnect from both ends. Submerge in warm water with a small amount of mild, unscented soap. Run water through the tube, then rinse. Hang to dry over a shower rod or hook. Never use bleach, alcohol, or scented cleaners on tubing.
- **Humidifier chamber.** Wash with warm soapy water. To sanitize, fill with one part white vinegar to one part water, let sit for about twenty minutes, then rinse thoroughly and air-dry.
- **Headgear and straps.** Hand-wash in warm water with mild soap. Squeeze gently (don't wring) and lay flat to dry.
- **Reusable filter.** If your machine uses one, rinse under warm water until the water runs clear, squeeze gently, and air-dry. Never put it back in the machine wet.

When to Replace Each Component

Cleaning extends the life of your supplies, but doesn't eliminate the need to replace them. Manufacturers set replacement intervals based on material wear and microbial accumulation.

Typical schedules:

- Disposable filters: every 2 weeks
- Reusable filters: clean weekly, replace per manufacturer schedule (often every 6 months)
- Tubing: every 3 months
- Nasal cushions and nasal pillows: every 2 weeks
- Full face mask cushions: every 4 weeks
- Headgear and chinstrap: every 6 months
- Humidifier water chamber: every 6 months

Most insurance plans, including Medicare, cover replacement supplies on roughly this schedule. If your equipment was provided by Unicare Health Services, you can set up automatic supply shipments so replacements arrive on the correct interval and you never have to think about reordering.

A note on cleaning gadgets and shortcuts

Several products marketed for CPAP cleaning use ozone gas or UV light to sanitize equipment automatically. The FDA has cautioned that these devices have not been cleared as safe and effective for CPAP, can leave residual ozone at levels above safe limits, and may degrade mask, tubing, or humidifier components. Manufacturer warranties on your equipment may also be voided by their use. The standard recommendation, supported by sleep medicine and the device manufacturers themselves, is to use mild unscented soap, warm water, and the periodic vinegar rinse described above. A few other shortcuts to avoid: never use bleach, never use scented soaps or hand sanitizer on tubing or cushions, and do not put any CPAP component in the dishwasher unless the manufacturer specifically states it is dishwasher-safe.

Working with Your Care Team

Most cleaning issues are easy to solve once you know what to ask. If your mask irritates your skin despite proper cleaning, the fit is probably wrong and your Unicare respiratory therapist can help you switch sizes or styles. If you are getting frequent sinus infections or a chronic morning cough, mention the equipment when you call your provider. The CPAP setup is often the cause. If your humidifier chamber is cloudy with mineral buildup despite regular cleaning, you may be using tap water instead of distilled.

The goal of all this maintenance is invisible: equipment that does its job quietly while you sleep, supplies that arrive when they should, and a therapy you don't have to think about much beyond turning the machine on at night. A consistent cleaning routine is what makes that possible.



Questions? We're here to help.

Contact your Unicare Health respiratory therapist or call **800.400.6333** for supply orders, mask fitting, or guidance on CPAP cleaning and maintenance.