Getting Back in the Boat

Timothy Moravits, 60, and his wife Jeri, 56, love their retirement in Sarasota, Florida. But until recently, it hadn't been much fun.

June 17, 2019 By Bob Barnett

Last year, Moravits, newly diagnosed with head and neck cancer, kept falling asleep everywhere—including in waiting rooms and even in his oncologist's office. "The doctor asked me, 'Is he depressed?'" recalls Jeri. She told him that her husband was always falling asleep and that she thought maybe he had sleep apnea.

Moravits had simultaneous chemotherapy and radiation treatment, and when his neck healed, he tackled his sleep problem. His doctor referred him for a sleep study—a noninvasive overnight exam in which an individual is monitored during sleep. MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, where he was treated, was the first comprehensive cancer center to open a sleep center a decade ago.

Moravits was diagnosed with obstructive sleep apnea (OSA), a common, serious condition in which the airway temporarily closes up, stopping normal breathing briefly and repeatedly while sleeping. "It would happen to me 85 or 90 times an hour," he recalls. "Plus, I was waking up eight to 10 times a night, getting up and roaming around before trying to get back to sleep." OSA increases the risk of stroke, and—it has recently been found—cancer. People with head and neck cancers are particularly prone to it, since both the tumor itself and radiation to the neck can obstruct breathing. Untreated, it's associated with poorer outcomes and higher mortality in cancer patients.

After the sleep study, Moravits went home with a continuous positive airway pressure therapy machine (CPAP), which ensures adequate oxygen during sleep. But the mask wasn't comfortable; he didn't use it. He went in for a consultation, and the sleep technician suggested that he just sit and hold the mask. When he dozed off (of course), the technician put the mask on him and turned on the machine; he wanted Moravits to know what good sleep feels like. He slept for four hours and woke up convinced. Moravits was eventually fitted with a bilevel positive airway pressure machine (BiPAP), which makes both inhaling and exhaling easier. That did the trick.

"I still have some fatigue," says Moravits, who has been cancer-free for six months, "but I now get seven or eight hours of quality sleep each night, and I feel great the next day. I can now go fishing all day. My hobby is remaking fishing poles. Jeri and I go out on the boat, go on walks together, play with our dogs—and we socialize more." Getting the right amount of quality rest, he says, has changed both of their lives. "Sleep is more important than you think."

To learn more sleep solutions for people with cancer, click here.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/article/getting-back-boat-timothy-moravits