

# Mike Jennings

## Southeastern's Sleep Apnea Program Spurred Driver Mike Jennings' 123-Pound Weight Loss



We have teamed up with BlueCross® BlueShield® of South Carolina for associates to share their stories of how they live Southeastern Strong. If you want to share your story, email us at [seflstrong@sefl.com](mailto:seflstrong@sefl.com).

Five years ago, just putting his shoes on and getting in and out of his truck left 308-pound linehaul driver Mike Jennings short of breath. At 5'10", the Roanoke, VA., resident had to take blood pressure medication and frequently felt tired.

When Southeastern Freight Lines sponsored a safety program to detect and treat sleep apnea among drivers in 2011, Jennings was diagnosed with the condition. He not only credits the program with helping him sleep more soundly, he says it helped him lose 123 pounds and save about \$1,500 a year.

Sleep apnea is a condition that causes a person to stop breathing up to 30 times or more an hour during sleep from blocked airways. The problem is often seen in people who are overweight. Treating the condition and losing extra weight can help a driver sleep more soundly and reduce the chance of falling asleep at the wheel. Drivers diagnosed with sleep apnea are often prescribed a CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) machine. The

machine is connected to a face mask, and drivers wear the mask when they sleep. The machine pushes air into the airways to keep them open.

Jennings knew he needed the CPAP, but he found the machine a bit noisy and the mask irritating. "At the time I thought, 'This stinks,'" he said. "I thought, I'm only 40 years old and I have at least 25 plus years yet to drive. I didn't want to have to wear this thing another 25 years!" Yet, looking back, he's actually grateful he was diagnosed with the condition.

"If it wasn't for the sleep apnea program, I wouldn't have lost the weight and my health wouldn't be what it is today," said Jennings, now a lean 185 pounds. "It was the big game changer." The program spurred him to take a series of moderate steps to change his lifestyle. Over a five-year period, the improvements led to his impressive weight loss.

When he first started driving at age 21, Jennings' weight hovered around 205 pounds. "I guess I was kind of

chunky as a kid, but I was pretty active," he said. "I really didn't start gaining weight in a big way until I got married at 29."

In the intervening years, Jennings developed a serious soft drink habit. Moving freight hundreds of miles a day from one city to another kept him on the road five nights a week, and while working, he ate out every single meal. He often ate big meals from all-you-can-eat buffets for breakfast, supper or both.

Jennings came to work for Southeastern Freight Lines in 2010. When the sleep apnea program inspired him to take action to improve his health, his first change was to reduce portion size. The second was to stop eating out, especially fast food.

"Now I rarely eat out," Jennings` said. "I pack my meals and take them with me in the truck every night. That alone has saved me about \$1,500 or so a year."

In addition to taking meals and snacks in the truck with him, Jennings gradually wove other new habits into his daily routine. At the time, SEFL's BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina weight loss health coaching wasn't available as it is now, but he made many changes on his own. He:

- Eliminated soft drinks in favor of about a gallon of water a day
- Starting eating within 30 minutes of waking to boost his metabolism
- Began eating oatmeal for breakfast daily (the real thing, not instant)
- Replaced potato chips with grapes and cherries for snacks
- Cut back on red meat, pasta and bread
- Started trying to eat a salad most days
- Made blackened chicken, tilapia, grilled squash, green beans and corn on the cob (microwaved in the husk for about 3 minutes) his standard fare
- Begin eating lots of fresh veggies that he and his wife, Cindy, grew in their garden
- Cut down on sugar and salt
- Began taking vitamins daily

Jennings' strong will, which propelled him to quit smoking 14 years ago, helped him stay the course when he'd hit a plateau in his weight loss. Although he never started a formal exercise program, as his energy increased, he naturally became more active. Increasingly, he enjoyed driving his tractor, cutting hay and taking care of the cows on his hobby farm.



**Before: Mike Jennings**



**After: Mike Jennings**



“Early on, a buddy in Memphis and I bet \$100 on who could lose 50 pounds first,” Jennings said. “I won, and I was surprised when he insisted on paying up.”

Jennings said the hardest thing has been sticking to his plan over time, especially when he would seem to stop losing. “I had plateaus at 250, 230 and 215 pounds,” he said. “When I’d hit one, I’d change something up. That seemed to start the weight loss again.”

Over time, Jennings went from a 44 pants size down to a size 34. His shirt size went from 2X to medium. He said the weight loss has definitely changed his life in many ways. At a recent physical, his doctor asked if he was taking cholesterol-lowering medicine because his test results were so excellent. The doctor also took him completely off his blood pressure medicine. When

Jennings reached 215 pounds last April, he was retested for sleep apnea and learned the problem had disappeared.

People who haven’t seen him in years marvel at the change in Jennings’ appearance, and he has inspired some to lose weight themselves. His sister-in-law used his approach and his tips to lose 100 pounds. Another friend lost 150 pounds following Jennings’ example. Other drivers often seek Jennings’ advice.

“But I want to let other drivers know it wasn’t easy to lose the weight and keep it off,” Jennings said. “It’s worth it, though. I’m happy about my clothing size now and my health. I’m more confident about myself, not just my appearance, but everything.”

Best of all, Jennings says, he sleeps soundly and safely every night – without a machine.

## Do you want to lose weight or quit smoking?

SEFL teamed up with BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina to bring you stories of associates who are living Southeastern Strong. The goal is to inspire you and point you to resources that can help you make positive changes in your own life. Rally®, a digital health platform free to SEFL-insured associates, can help you lose weight, eat healthy, quit smoking and move more. To sign up for Rally, go to [www.SouthCarolinaBlues.com](http://www.SouthCarolinaBlues.com) and log in to **My Health Toolkit®**. Select the **Wellness** tab, then select **Rally** from the drop-down menu and follow the instructions.



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