

SNORING AND SLEEP APNEA IN CHILDREN

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Whilst you may not think of children as typical snorers or suffering from sleep apnea, a surprising number of children do. The condition can be just as serious as in adults. It may lead to daytime health problems, such as failure to thrive, delays in a child's development or behavioural problems.

WHAT IS SLEEP APNEA

Sleep apnea is a condition where the child repeatedly stops breathing during sleep. These episodes last from around 10 seconds to a minute and usually occur as a result of an obstructed airway. In children, this obstruction is most commonly caused by large tonsils and adenoids. This is known as obstructive sleep apnea. A less common variation is central sleep apnea. It is caused by disruptions to the brain signals that regulate breathing.

NIGHTTIME SIGNS OF SLEEP APNEA

Children with sleep apnea almost always snore, struggle to breathe and experience restless sleep. You may also notice frequent pauses in breathing lasting between 10 seconds and a minute. The pause may end with a gasping or choking sound and the child may briefly awaken as he or she struggles to breathe. Young children may also suck in their chest or occasionally adopt unusual sleeping positions during an episode of apnea. Other signs include profuse sweating, wetting the bed repeatedly, waking up with a dry mouth, headache or in a confused state.

DAYTIME SYMPTOMS OF SLEEP APNEA

Because of the events occurring during sleep, your child may experience other issues during the day.



Infants might feed poorly and fail to gain weight. A child with sleep apnea may lag behind in many areas of development. Older children may have behavioural problems, such as hyperactivity, aggression, learning difficulties or poor concentration. Sleepiness can result in personality changes, poor school performance and problems with interpersonal relationships. They may become frustrated and depressed. If left untreated, sleep apnea can also cause heart problems and high blood pressure that may be life-threatening in extreme cases.

CAUSES OF SLEEP APNEA

The most common cause of snoring and sleep apnea in children is enlarged tonsils and adenoids. Obesity can also be a significant contributing factor. Cranio-facial abnormalities or conditions that affect the tongue or airways may predispose your child to snoring or sleep apnea. For example, with Down's syndrome, an enlarged tongue may block the airway. Sleep apnea is more common in children with a small or receding jaw. Children who have had a cleft palate repaired may also be at increased risk of sleep apnea.

HOW IS SLEEP APNEA DIAGNOSED?

Sleep apnea is diagnosed by clinical evaluation and a sleep study. The study is conducted either in hospital or at home. The child is wired up and attached to computers that measure sleep, breathing and oxygen levels.

HOW IS SLEEP APNEA TREATED?

If your child has large tonsils or adenoids, removal is usually the first line of treatment. In many cases, an adenotonsillectomy will cure the sleep apnea. Surgical correction of any cranio-facial abnormalities may also prove effective. If the condition is unsuitable for surgery, the next best treatment is nasal continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP). This consists of a pump that blows air through a mask worn over the nose. The pump only needs to be used at night and treatment is effective immediately in controlling any symptoms and long-term effects. With the appropriate education and support for parents, CPAP is well tolerated by most children. If your child's sleep apnea is due to him or her being significantly overweight, losing weight may help or even cure the apnea.

GOOD SLEEP HABITS ARE IMPORTANT

Although the child with sleep apnea may have disturbed sleep, developing and maintaining a good sleep pattern and sleep habits is important. A regular bedtime and waking up time should be established, and a stimulating environment avoided before bed. The bedroom should be quiet and dark. Caffeine containing drinks such as colas should be avoided in the evening.

OTHER CONDITIONS

Although snoring and sleep apnea are the most

common conditions, children may also suffer from other sleep disorders. Parasomnias, such as sleep walking and night terrors, are extremely distressing to the child and parent. Underlying medical conditions, such as epilepsy, asthma or cystic fibrosis may also cause sleeping problems. Sleep centres are the best place for information on these less common conditions.

ABOUT US

Sleep Disorders Australia (SDA) is a voluntary not-for-profit organisation that provides information and support to people affected by sleep disorders throughout Australia. SDA advocates the needs of people with sleep disorders by raising awareness of sleep disorders and their impact on our lives. We also offer support and education with regards to preventing and treating sleep disorders.

We would be delighted if you joined us. Membership is open to sufferers, family members, medical professionals, and the general public. You can join via our website or email our membership officer for more information.

If you would like to support us financially, you can donate via our website or send a cheque to our address.

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DISCLAIMER: Information in this fact sheet is general in nature. It is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Discuss with your doctor if you are concerned about your sleep or other medical conditions.

