

## Sleep Apnea and Your Child

Does your child snore a lot? Does he sleep restlessly? Does he have difficulty breathing, or does he gasp or choke, while he sleeps?

If your child has these symptoms, he may have a condition known as sleep apnea. Sleep apnea is a common problem that affects an estimated 2% of all children including many who are undiagnosed. If not treated, sleep apnea can lead to a variety of problems. These include heart, behavior, learning and growth problems.

### How do I know if my child has sleep apnea?

Symptoms of sleep apnea include

- Frequent snoring
- Problems breathing during the night
- Sleepiness during the day
- Difficulty paying attention
- Behavior problems

If you notice any of these symptoms, let your pediatrician know as soon as possible. Your pediatrician may recommend a sleep study - usually an overnight study called a polysomnogram. Overnight polysomnograms are conducted at hospitals and major medical centers. During the study, doctors and medical staff will watch your child sleep. Several sensors will be attached to your child to monitor breathing, oxygenation, and brain waves electroencephalogram (EEG).

The results of the study will show whether your child suffers from sleep apnea. Other specialists, such as pediatric pulmonologists, otolaryngologists, neurologists, and pediatricians with specialty training in sleep disorders, may help your pediatrician make a diagnosis.

### What causes sleep apnea?

Many children with sleep apnea have larger than normal tonsils and adenoids. Tonsils are the round, reddish masses on each side of your child's throat. They help fight infections in the body. You can only see the adenoids with an X-ray or special mirror. It lies in the space between the nose and the throat.

Large tonsils and adenoids may block a child's airway while she sleeps. This causes her to snore and wake up often during the night. However, not every child with large tonsils and adenoids has sleep apnea. A sleep study can tell your pediatrician whether your child has sleep apnea or if she is simply snoring.

Children, both with other medical conditions, such as Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, or craniofacial (skull and face) abnormalities, are at higher risk for sleep apnea. Overweight children are also more likely to suffer from sleep apnea.

### How is sleep apnea treated?

The most common way to treat sleep apnea is to remove your child's tonsils and adenoids. This surgery is called tonsillectomy and adenoidectomy. It is highly effective in treating sleep apnea.

Another effective treatment is nasal continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP), which requires the child to wear a mask while he sleeps. The mask delivers steady air pressure through the child's nose, allowing him to breathe comfortably. Continuous positive airway pressure is usually used in children who do not improve after tonsillectomy and adenoidectomy, or who are not candidates for tonsillectomy and adenoidectomy.

Children who may need additional treatment include children who are overweight or suffering from another complicating condition. Overweight children will improve if they lose weight, but may need to use CPAP until the weight is lost.

**Remember:** A good night's sleep is important to good health. If your child suffers from the symptoms of sleep apnea, talk with your pediatrician. A proper diagnosis and treatment can mean restful nights and restful days for your child and your family.