

Snoring in children

Overview

Although it is more common in men and women, children can also be snorers — and they can be just as loud and disturb their sleep and that of everyone around them.

Around 10% of children snore and of these children, about 2% will have obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA). OSA is a medical condition where people experience difficulty breathing when they are asleep and have blockages to their airway and stop breathing. This can cause a person's sleep to be disturbed because of drops in their oxygen level overnight and also the disturbance from the choking sensations.

The most common symptom of OSA is snoring, but snoring does not automatically mean a child is suffering from this condition. Snoring may be caused by simple and transient causes like a blocked nose due to an infection or allergies.

Causes

Snoring happens when the soft tissues in the back of the throat vibrate. When a person sleeps, muscles that hold the airways open relax, but in snorers this causes a narrowing of the airways and partial blockage of the air passage. Because of this, the walls around the pharynx at the back of the throat vibrate, creating the snoring sound.

Some common causes of snoring are:

- Being overweight, which causes excessive fatty tissue to be deposited in the neck area, putting pressure on the airways.
- Nasal congestion from colds, flu or allergies.
- Previous nasal trauma causing a bend in the nasal septum.
- Conditions that affect facial shape, such as a small jaw or a flattened nose.
- Conditions affecting the throat, such as cleft palate or previous trauma.
- Medical conditions causing weak muscles or low muscle tone
- Medical conditions associated with large tongues, for example Down syndrome

Symptoms

Aside from the actual noise, symptoms of snoring can include:

- Daytime sleepiness that persists.
- Disturbed sleep.

- Morning headache upon waking.
- Difficulty concentrating or focusing.
- A dry mouth or throat in the morning.

Diagnosis

Your doctor will ask about the child's symptoms, and if there is any concern about the possibility of sleep apnoea, they will probably refer your child for a sleep study at a hospital or clinic. It is important to ensure the sleep clinic has experience in paediatric sleep studies, as children require a different approach to this study.

A sleep study is non-invasive and involves monitoring a child's sleep and breathing patterns overnight by attaching small electrodes to the skin. Usually a parent or carer can stay with the child overnight.

Some doctors and specialists also suggest a parent or carer video, record or keeps a diary of the child's sleep patterns and symptoms at home to help with the diagnosis.

Treatment

The treatment for snoring will depend largely on symptoms and whether a child has OSA. These treatments can include:

- If a child is diagnosed with OSA and has enlarged tonsils and adenoids then they will usually be referred to an ear, nose and throat specialist for removal of tonsils and adenoids. In the majority of children this procedure is curative.
- Medical treatment of allergies with nasal sprays.
- Weight loss.
- Occasionally children require a machine called a CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) machine, which delivers a constant pressure of room air through a mask fitted to the face.
- Changing the child's sleeping position — sleeping on the side instead of on the back.

There are many alternative or complementary treatments on the market that claim to counteract snoring, but these are not scientifically validated and medical advice should be sought before using them for children.

Lifestyle and Diet

A healthy lifestyle may not only help reduce childhood snoring, but will benefit the entire family. A diet rich in fresh fruit, vegetables and whole foods and plenty of exercise is a great place to start. Other tips include:

- Addressing any weight issues.
- Avoiding exposure to cigarette smoke.
- Encouraging the child to sleep on his or her side.
- Avoid known allergens such as dust, and danger from cats and dogs where possible as they may lead to nasal congestion, causing or making the snoring worse.
- Developing and maintaining good bedtime routines will encourage good sleeping patterns. Establishing a regular bedtime and avoiding overstimulating children before bed is integral to a positive routine. Sleeping areas should be quiet, dark and well ventilated, and bedding should be suitable for the season

Support & online resources

For additional resources and support see:

- **The Australasian Sleep Association** is a peak scientific body that represents clinicians, scientists and researchers across the broad area of sleep and has developed several fact sheets on paediatric sleep. www.sleepaus.on.net
- **The Raising Children** website has a lot of valuable information about sleep — from birth to adolescence. <http://raisingchildren.net.au/>

It'sMyHealth.com.au