

Sleep Apnea in Children



Overview

Sleep apnea is an interruption of breathing during sleep. Though we often think of sleep apnea as a problem experienced by adults, it is also common in children. Disruptive sleep is not healthy for a child. It can lead to problems when a child is awake.

Causes

Sleep apnea in children is caused by a blockage of the airways. This often occurs because of enlarged tonsils and adenoids. The adenoids are a mass of lymphatic tissue at the back of the nasal cavity. Sleep apnea is more common in children who are overweight. Other risk factors include having a small jaw or facial deformity, muscle weakness, and Down syndrome.

Symptoms

A child who has sleep apnea may experience symptoms such as snoring, long pauses in breathing, and tossing and turning in bed. Symptoms may also include mouth breathing, night sweats and poor growth. Sleep apnea may cause bed wetting and hormonal problems. It may contribute to attention problems during the day.

Treatment

There are several treatment options for sleep apnea. In many cases, symptoms can be alleviated with surgery to remove enlarged tonsils and adenoids. Proper weight control can also be helpful. Some children benefit from the use of a continuous positive airway pressure machine (commonly called a "CPAP" machine). This gently blows air to keep the airways open at night. A child can use an oral appliance to help position the jaws and tongue during sleep. Conditions associated with sleep apnea, such as allergies, asthma, and acid reflux, may also need to be addressed.