Suite 2101, 31a Lasso Road, Gregory Hills NSW 2557
Suite 102, 4 Hyde Parade, Campbelltown NSW 2560
P) 02 4625 1682 F) 02 4625 1032
www.macarthurent.com.au

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When Children Snore: Why It Matters

Understanding persistent snoring and sleep-disordered breathing

Occasional snoring during a cold is common. Snoring on most nights, especially with breathing pauses, gasping or restless sleep, may be a sign of sleep-disordered breathing and deserves assessment.

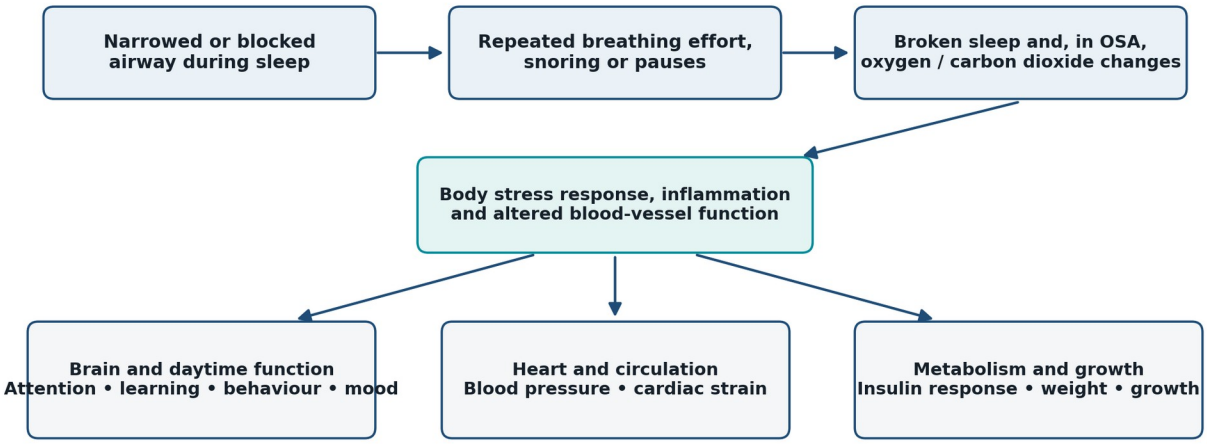
Snoring is a symptom, not a diagnosis

Sleep-disordered breathing (SDB) describes a spectrum from primary snoring through to obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA). In OSA, the upper airway repeatedly narrows or closes during sleep. This can disturb sleep and may alter oxygen and carbon dioxide levels. Not every child who snores has OSA, and not every child develops complications, but persistent snoring should not automatically be assumed to be harmless.[1,2]

Signs parents may notice

- Loud snoring on three or more nights each week.
- Pauses in breathing, gasping, choking, snorting or laboured breathing during sleep.
- Restless sleep, unusual sleeping positions, sweating or frequent waking.
- Mouth-breathing, blocked nose, morning headaches or difficulty waking.
- Daytime hyperactivity, irritability, poor concentration or sleepiness.
- Bedwetting, poor growth or concerns about school performance.

How disrupted breathing during sleep may affect the brain and body



Not every child develops these effects. Risk varies with severity, duration, age and other health factors.

The pathways shown are simplified. Effects vary between children and are influenced by the severity and duration of SDB, age, weight, other medical conditions and individual susceptibility.[2,5]

Effects on Learning, Behaviour and Wellbeing

Children with disrupted sleep may look overactive, impulsive or inattentive rather than obviously sleepy.

Thinking and learning

Research links childhood SDB with difficulties across attention, memory, language, executive function and both verbal and non-verbal reasoning. A large meta-analysis found measurable neurocognitive differences across the full SDB spectrum, including children classified as primary snorers.[1,3]

- Attention and concentration may be reduced.
- Working memory, planning and self-regulation may be affected.
- Learning, language development and classroom performance may suffer.
- The effects are often subtle and may not be obvious during a short daytime appointment.

Behaviour and mood

Poor-quality sleep can be associated with hyperactivity, impulsivity, oppositional behaviour, emotional outbursts, anxiety or low mood. Because these symptoms can resemble attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), sleep and breathing should form part of the assessment when a child has new or unexplained behavioural concerns.[4,7]

Quality of life

Persistent SDB may affect the child's energy, confidence, relationships and participation in family or school activities. It can also disrupt parents' sleep and increase family worry. Disease-specific questionnaires such as the OSA-18 help measure this day-to-day burden, but do not diagnose OSA.

Why can this happen?

Repeated airway obstruction can cause frequent brief arousals, increased breathing effort and, in OSA, intermittent oxygen reduction and carbon dioxide elevation. These changes may activate stress pathways, inflammation and oxidative stress. The developing prefrontal brain networks involved in attention, behaviour and executive function may be particularly vulnerable.[2]

Important: primary snoring can still be associated with learning or behavioural difficulties even when a sleep study does not show frequent apnoeas. Symptoms and daytime function matter as well as test numbers.[1]

Can these effects improve?

Many children show improvements in symptoms, behaviour and quality of life when clinically significant SDB is treated. Cognitive or executive-function changes may improve less consistently, so early recognition is sensible rather than waiting for major school or behavioural problems to develop.[8]

Effects on the Heart, Metabolism and Growth

Heart and circulation

The American Heart Association identifies childhood OSA as being associated with higher blood pressure, abnormal heart rhythm, changes in heart muscle structure or function, and increased pressure on the right side of the heart. Proposed pathways include repeated sympathetic 'stress' activation, inflammation and impaired blood-vessel function.[5]

These cardiovascular effects are uncommon in an individual otherwise-well child, but the risk becomes more relevant with more severe OSA, obesity or other medical conditions.

Metabolism and weight

OSA is associated with insulin resistance, abnormal blood fats and fatty liver disease, particularly when obesity is also present. The relationship can work in both directions: obesity can worsen airway obstruction, while disrupted sleep and metabolic stress may make healthy weight regulation more difficult.[2,6]

Growth and development

Some younger children with significant OSA have poor weight gain or growth failure. Increased work of breathing, disturbed growth-hormone secretion and reduced appetite may contribute. Developmental progress can also be affected when sleep remains poor over time.[2,7]

What a 10-year cohort found

A large observational study compared children with non-surgically treated OSA with matched controls. The untreated group had higher relative rates of several later diagnoses:[7]

Outcome	Relative rate (HR)
Delayed developmental milestones	2.48
Growth failure	1.97
ADHD diagnosis	1.66
Precocious puberty	1.59
Obesity	1.51

HR means hazard ratio, a comparison of relative rates over time. These findings show associations in a population; they do not mean that an individual child will develop these problems, and they cannot prove that OSA alone caused them.

Other possible effects

- Bedwetting that persists or returns after a period of dryness.
- More respiratory illness and greater healthcare use.
- Morning headaches, fatigue, poor appetite or failure to thrive.

When Should My Child Be Assessed?

Arrange a medical review if snoring occurs on most nights, lasts for more than a few weeks, or is accompanied by breathing pauses, gasping, restless sleep or daytime concerns.

Seek earlier review if your child has

- Witnessed pauses in breathing, choking or repeated gasping during sleep.
- Marked daytime sleepiness, morning headaches, significant behaviour change or declining school performance.
- Poor growth, feeding difficulty, persistent bedwetting or frequent respiratory problems.
- Obesity, Down syndrome, craniofacial differences, neuromuscular disease or significant heart/lung disease.

Seek urgent medical help

Call 000 or attend an Emergency Department if your child has prolonged breathing difficulty, turns blue or grey, is difficult to wake, or has severe breathing distress while awake.

What assessment may involve

Assessment usually begins with a detailed sleep history and examination of the nose, tonsils, adenoids, jaw and growth. A sleep study or overnight oximetry may be recommended in selected children. Short videos of your child's breathing during sleep can be useful, provided they are recorded safely and without delaying urgent care.

The reassuring part

The associations described in this guide are reasons to assess persistent snoring, not reasons to panic. Many children improve substantially once the cause is identified and appropriately managed. Treatment may include nasal or allergy care, adenotonsillectomy, weight support, orthodontic or craniofacial input, or positive-airway-pressure therapy, depending on the child.

Key evidence

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This guide provides general information and does not replace individual medical advice.