

Tonsils, Adenoids, and Breathing During Sleep

Why is this surgery being done?

Your child is having surgery because of one or more of the following:

- **Sleep-disordered breathing**, such as snoring, mouth breathing, restless sleep, or pauses in breathing during sleep
- **Repeated throat infections (tonsillitis)** that affect health, school attendance, or daily life

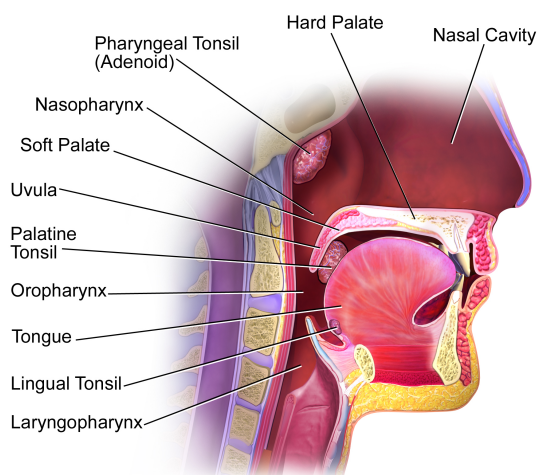
Some children have **both** problems.

Breathing problems during sleep can happen because the airway is narrowed in **more than one place**, such as:

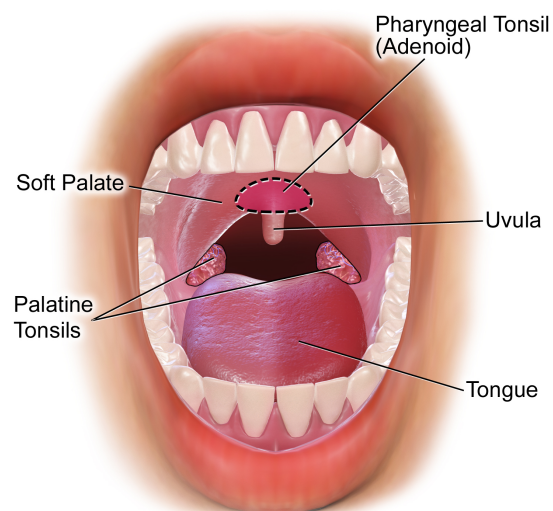
- The **throat** (tonsils or adenoids)
- The **nose**

This is called multilevel airway obstruction, which means blockage at more than one level of the airway.

Tonsils and Adenoids



Tonsils and Throat



Tonsils

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Side view and mouth view : Blausen.com staff (2014).

Resized. Dashed outline in mouth view: adenoids behind the soft palate.

What are tonsils and adenoids?

- **Tonsils** are located at the back of the throat.
- **Adenoids** are located higher up, behind the nose.

They are part of the immune system, but in some children they become **too large** or **infected often**, which can block airflow or cause illness.

Why remove tonsils and/or adenoids?

Removing the tonsils and/or adenoids may help:

- Improve breathing during sleep
- Reduce snoring and restless sleep
- Improve daytime behavior and energy
- Reduce frequent or severe throat infections

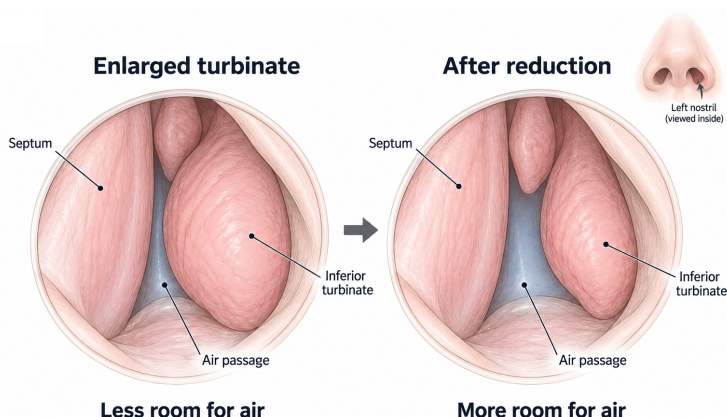
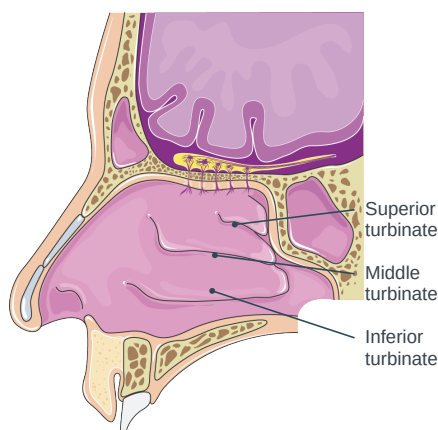
The decision is based on your child's symptoms, exam and medical history. For selected mild cases, watchful waiting and supportive treatment may be reasonable.

Website artwork updated October 12, 2026. Clinical text: v1.4, unchanged.

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The Nose and Breathing

Sagittal view of the nose



Illustrative anterior view through the left nostril.

Servier Medical Art | CC BY 4.0 | Resized; turbinate labels added.

Why does the nose matter?

Breathing through the nose is important for healthy sleep. In some children, nasal blockage can add to breathing problems during sleep.

Inside the nose are normal structures called **turbinates**. They help warm, clean, and humidify the air. When they become enlarged, nasal breathing can be harder.

When is nasal surgery done?

Nasal treatment is **not routine** and is **not always needed**. The nose is looked at carefully, and any decision is made **case by case**.

Any possible nasal procedure is discussed and agreed beforehand. Re-checking the airway during surgery helps decide whether that agreed option is needed.

What is the overall goal of surgery?

The goal is to:

- Improve your child's **breathing and sleep**
- Treat the **main causes** of symptoms
- Use the **least amount of surgery needed** for your child

Treatment is tailored to your child. Sleep-disordered breathing may continue or return after surgery. Ongoing symptoms need another assessment.

Risks

All surgeries carry some risk, but serious problems are uncommon. Some children need overnight monitoring, particularly those under 3 or with severe sleep apnea.

Tonsils / adenoids

- Sore throat after surgery
- Bleeding (uncommon)
- Infection (rare)

Nasal treatment (if needed)

- Temporary nasal congestion
- Mild bleeding or crusting

Fresh mouth/throat bleeding, vomiting blood or repeated swallowing after tonsil surgery needs emergency assessment, even if it stops. Call 911 for heavy bleeding, fainting or breathing difficulty. Follow the companion consent and recovery instructions.

This handout supports, but does not replace, an assessment and discussion with your child's surgeon.

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