

TONSILS AND ADENOIDS

Tonsils and adenoids are pockets of lymphoid tissue that are located in the back of the throat. They filter out bacteria and help us fight off infections. Occasionally these tissues do more harm than good. They may harbor bacteria and allow the bacteria to multiply causing infections, most common of which is caused by the organism Beta streptococcus, commonly referred to as Strep throat. The symptoms accompanying this infection usually are a severe sore throat, elevated temperature, difficulty swallowing, and often times a reaction in the lymph nodes in the neck (swollen glands). If untreated, the bacteria can also cause Rheumatic fever (scarring of the valves of the heart and scarring of the kidneys). This infection usually should be treated with antibiotics. When our tonsils and adenoids are incapable of fighting off this particular bacterium, we develop recurrent episodes of acute infection. It is at this point when the adenoids and tonsils should be removed.

The second common problem that one sees with tonsils and adenoids are that they can increase in size to the point that they significantly narrow the airway at the level of the back of the nose and upper throat. The most common symptom seen with this is snoring and chronic mouth breathing. Chronic mouth breathing is associated with a higher incidence of dental problem. In addition, if a child is a chronic mouth breather, there can be significant dental growth abnormalities that develop including a high arched palate, a narrow upper jaw and a short lower jaw necessitating orthodontics (braces). When a child who develops these problems sees an orthodontist they often will require the child to be evaluated for the cause of difficulty breathing that caused the orthodontic problem in the first place. It may also be recommended that these children have their tonsils and adenoids removed to improve the airway and allow their teeth to develop normally.

The third potential problem with enlarged tonsils and adenoids is the potential for increased incidence of infections of the ears and sinuses. Abnormal airflow through the nose creates difficulty in clearing the nasal secretions and a build up of material allowing for a higher incidence of sinus infections. Obstruction of the openings to the eustachian tube (tube which runs from the back of the throat to the ear) from the enlarged adenoids will reduce the ability of air to enter and exit from the ear and result in a much higher incidence of ear infections. Removal of tonsils and adenoids is also recommended for this problem.

The surgical removal of the tonsils and adenoids is called an adenotonsillectomy. It is performed in the hospital under general anesthesia (while asleep). The procedure requires approximately 45 minutes. Often times the individual can leave the hospital the same day as surgery. Recovery time is approximately a week to 10 days. As with any surgical procedure, there are potential problems and complications, which your physician will discuss with you directly.