Inflamed adenoids

This information sheet from Great Ormond Street Hospital explains the causes, symptoms and treatment of inflamed adenoids and where to get help.

The adenoids are areas of tissue high in the throat behind the nose. With the tonsils, your child's adenoids help them build up immunity and fight infection. Sometimes the adenoids become infected by bacteria or viruses. This makes them enlarge (become inflamed) and can make it more difficult to breathe through the nose. Some children have larger than usual adenoids, which can also affect their breathing. There is also a link between large tonsils and adenoids and a condition called glue ear. This happens when the middle ear becomes blocked by a sticky substance which affects your child's hearing.

What causes inflamed adenoids?

Both bacteria and viruses can cause an infection – these are usually picked up as part of everyday life so there is little you can do to prevent them although good hygiene including hand washing is important.

Large adenoids can develop naturally in the womb – doctors do not know what makes them grow larger than usual.

What are the signs and symptoms of inflamed adenoids?

The main symptoms are caused by the difficulty in breathing through the nose. Children with inflamed or enlarged adenoids breathe noisily, usually through their mouth. This makes their mouth dry and at night can lead to disturbed sleep. This can lead to a condition called sleep apnoea, where your child stops breathing for a couple of seconds while asleep and then starts again.

How are inflamed adenoids diagnosed?

Doctors usually diagnosed inflamed adenoids from a child's history, especially if their sleep is disturbed or they have glue ear. Sometimes imaging scans may be needed to check the size of the adenoids as they cannot be seen easily.

How are inflamed adenoids treated?

The most common way to treat problems with the adenoids is to remove them, usually along with the tonsils, in an operation under general anaesthetic. More information about the operation is available in a separate information sheet.

What happens next?

The adenoids seem to grow during childhood and then shrink around the age of four. By the time your child reaches adulthood, their adenoids will have disappeared almost completely. This is because they are no longer needed, as your child's body will have other defence mechanisms to fight against infection. Your child may still have bouts of noisy breathing but this is unlikely to be caused by the adenoids.

Compiled by the Ear, Nose and Throat Department in collaboration with the Child and Family Information Group
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