

Sleep and Airway Issues

Sleep-related breathing disorders (SRBDs) are conditions of abnormal and difficult respiration during sleep. They include a range of conditions, from **chronic snoring** to **upper airway resistance syndrome (UARS)** to **obstructive sleep apnea (OSA)**. The impacts on health can range from minimal to catastrophic, depending on how long the condition has existed and the extent to which sleep is disrupted and oxygen levels are reduced.



A blocked airway can lead to significant health issues.

SRBDs can affect people of any age, size, or gender. Unfortunately, because many healthcare practitioners are not trained to or simply do not take the time to recognize the signs and symptoms, these conditions are often misdiagnosed or undiagnosed, especially in children and people who appear fit and healthy. Often people are not diagnosed until they are older and already suffering from serious health conditions. Dr. Watson is passionate about helping patients identify and treat these conditions *before* they cause more serious problems.

What are the impacts of sleep-related breathing disorders?

Rather than resting and recovering from the day, people with SRBDs are fighting for their lives struggling to breathe, which impacts the entire body. Multiple times per night, their cells are starved of oxygen, their sleep cycle is interrupted, and their heart, brain, and other organs are exposed to stress as the body fights for air. If left untreated, SRBDs can lead to daytime sleepiness, reduced cognitive function, and an increased risk for chronic health problems. Here are just a few issues known to be linked to SRBDs:

ADHD	Congestive heart failure	Heart attack
Anxiety	Depression	Hypertension
Arthritis	Diabetes	Irritable bowel syndrome
Alzheimer's disease	Eczema	Obesity
Broken teeth, TMD, jaw pain	Exhaustion	Stroke
Cancer	GERD	Thyroid issues
Chronic fatigue syndrome	Headaches	Weight gain

Many people get treatment for these conditions, but never get help with the underlying problem, which is often a restricted airway. Without treating the airway, our bodies continue to suffer from the cumulative effect of years of inadequate sleep.

What are the signs?

The signs of sleep-related breathing disorders show up first in the mouth, jaw, and face, which is why our team asks questions about sleep as part of routine dental examinations. Common indicators include:

Deep overbite	Dark shadows under eyes
High, narrow palate	Morning headaches
Narrow dental arch	Migraines
Crowded teeth	Dry mouth
Scalloped or fissured tongue	Concentration / memory problems
Tongue tie	Daytime sleepiness or fatigue
Enlarged tonsils	Difficulty getting up in morning
Constricted airway	Frequent colds/sore throat/tonsillitis
Jaw joint pain or clicking/popping	Nighttime snoring or gasping
Tooth wear, especially front teeth	Restless sleep / twisted bedsheets
Mouth breathing	Speech problems

What causes sleep-related breathing disorders?

Airway restrictions during sleep can happen for a wide variety of reasons:

- **Congestion** or a **deviated septum** can reduce air flow through the nose.

- Enlarged **adenoids** or **tonsils** can reduce airflow through the throat.
- The **throat muscles** may be too relaxed to hold the airway open (due to loss of muscle tone over time).
- The **tongue** may be too large for the dental arch or restricted by a tight frenum (or “tongue tie”)
- The airway may be blocked by **fatty tissue**.
- The **airway** itself may be too narrow (common in people with narrow dental arches and recessed jaws).

How do I get properly diagnosed?

First, you will need to be **screened by a sleep physician** (a medical doctor board-certified in sleep medicine by the American Board of Sleep Medicine). A sleep study, when recommended by your sleep physician, is the only reliable way to obtain objective data on the quality of your sleep. Though a study in a “sleep lab” typically provides the best and most accurate data, a sleep study can, at the doctor’s discretion, be done at-home in your own bed. To simplify the referral process, our office partners with [SleepTest.com](https://www.sleep-test.com) to provide an easy, affordable home sleep test option.



A home sleep test is an easy, affordable way to assess nighttime breathing and sleep quality.

If you are not ready to take a sleep study, there are things you can do at home to help determine if you might benefit from some type of therapy:

- **Try sleeping for a night with your mouth taped shut.** (A small square of medical tape works well for this.) If you are getting sufficient air through your nose, the tape should still be in place in the morning. If not, **try using Breathe Right® strips or other snore strips** to open your nose at night, or schedule an appointment to **have your nasal passages checked**.
- **Ask your sleep partner to watch for signs** of sleep-disordered breathing such as snoring, grinding, stopping breathing, gasping for air, or general restlessness. If you don’t have a partner, you can also **download a mobile app** that records the sounds you make at night.
- **Take an assessment** such as the [Epworth Sleepiness Scale](#) or [STOP-BANG Questionnaire](#) to assess your risk for obstructive sleep apnea.

What treatment options exist?

Once a sleep-related breathing disorder has been diagnosed by a qualified sleep physician, there are several treatment methods that have proven to be effective, including:

- **Positional Therapy:** Sleeping on your side instead of your back may be all the treatment you need.
- **CPAP:** This machine, which keeps the airway open with the use of continuous air pressure, is the “gold standard” when it comes to treating sleep apnea.
- **Oral Sleep Appliance / Mandibular Advancement Device:** This is a custom made, FDA approved plastic appliance that fits over both top and bottom teeth. It keeps your airway open by holding your lower jaw in a forward position, preventing collapse of the tongue and surrounding soft tissue into the throat. Once prescribed by a sleep physician, these appliances are made and managed by qualified dentists. Dr. Watson has completed advanced training so that he can provide an appropriate appliance that fits well and provides long-term relief.
- **Surgery:** Surgical options to improve breathing can include deviated septum surgery, removal of tonsils and adenoids, removal of soft tissues at the back of the throat (UPPP surgery), implantable nerve stimulators, and jaw surgery to move one or both jaws forward.
- **Combination Therapy:** In some cases, a combination of the therapies above will get the best results.



An oral sleep appliance opens the airway by holding the lower jaw forward during sleep.

Next steps

If you would like to know more about sleep breathing disorders, testing, and treatment, just ask Dr. Watson or anyone on our team! We are eager to help educate our patients and the broader community about this serious and under-recognized health issue. We can also email a list of resources that may be helpful.