Obstructive sleep apnea in children

What is obstructive sleep apnea?
Obstructive sleep apnea is a condition that causes short, temporary, and repeated breathing pauses while your child sleeps. When your child has sleep apnea, they may wake up frequently while sleeping because of the obstruction (airflow blockage) in their lungs.

What are the signs of obstructive sleep apnea?
Your child may show the following signs of sleep apnea:
• Snoring
• Problems breathing through their nose day and night
• Breathing pauses while sleeping
• Gasping, snoring, or choking sounds while sleeping
• Waking up often from sleep
• Bedwetting (usually if your child did not wet the bed before)
• Restlessness while sleeping
• Night sweating
• Moodiness or irritability during the day
• Nasal voice
• Attention problems
• Headaches
• Sleepiness
• Difficulty waking up

What causes obstructive sleep apnea?
Children with the following risk factors are more likely to have obstructive sleep apnea:
• Large tonsils or adenoids
• Obesity
• Down syndrome
• Family history of sleep apnea
• Narrow facial bones
• Frequent sinus infections
• Allergies
• Asthma
• Acid reflux
• Muscular dystrophy or cerebral palsy
• Cleft palate or history of cleft palate
• Small chin or throat

How is obstructive sleep apnea diagnosed?
Your child’s healthcare provider will ask about your child’s health history and look for signs of obstructive sleep apnea.

Your child may also need an overnight sleep study called a polysomnography (pol-ysom-no-grah-fee), or PSG. During a PSG, healthcare providers will watch your child’s breathing, heart rate, oxygen level, brain activity, and movement while sleeping.
How is obstructive sleep apnea treated?
Many children who have obstructive sleep apnea need to have their tonsils and adenoids removed. Your child’s healthcare provider may refer you to an ear, nose, and throat doctor (ENT), who will decide whether your child needs surgery.

If your child does not have large tonsils and adenoids that should be removed, the healthcare provider may recommend:

• Nasal continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP). If your child uses a CPAP machine, they will wear a mask over their nose while sleeping. The machine pushes air through your child’s throat and nose so they stay open while your child sleeps.

• Weight loss if your child is overweight.

• Medicine for allergies or asthma that cause nasal congestion.

When should I call my child’s healthcare provider?
Call your child’s healthcare provider if your child’s sleep apnea symptoms do not resolve after treatments or if you have any questions.