

Mouth Breathing Can Create Health Issues



For some, the phrase “spring is in the air” is quite literal. When the winter snow melts and flowers bloom, pollen and other materials can wreak havoc on those suffering from seasonal allergies, usually causing a habit called “mouth breathing.” The physical, medical, and social problems associated with mouth breathing are not recognized by most health care professionals, according to a study published in the January/February 2010 issue of *General Dentistry*, the peer-reviewed clinical journal of the Academy of General Dentistry (AGD).

Dentists typically request that their patients return every six months, which means that some people see their dentist more frequently than they see their physician. As a result, dentists should be the first to identify the symptoms of mouth breathing. Dentists who understand the problems associated with mouth breathing are in the best position to help their mouth breathing patients from the disorder’s many adverse effects.

“In our modern society, bottle-feeding, processed foods, food additives, synthetic materials, and industrial pollutants greatly contribute to allergies and upper airway obstruction, or mouth breathing, in patients,” says Yosh Jefferson, DMD, author of the study. “It is an unrecognized epidemic that touches almost every family in the industrialized countries.”

Over time, children whose mouth breathing goes untreated may suffer from abnormal facial and dental development, such as long, narrow faces and mouths, gummy smiles, gingivitis, narrow palates and high palatal vaults, and crooked teeth. In

addition to swollen tonsils, these are the tell-tale signs of mouth breathing problems. The poor sleeping habits that result from mouth breathing can adversely affect growth and academic performance. As Dr. Jefferson notes in his article, “Many of these children are misdiagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD) and hyperactivity.” In addition, mouth breathing can cause poor oxygen concentration in the bloodstream, which can cause high blood pressure, heart problems, sleep apnea, and other medical issues.

“Children who mouth breathe typically do not sleep well, causing them to be tired during the day and possibly unable to concentrate on academics,” Dr. Jefferson says. “If the child becomes frustrated in school, he or she may exhibit behavioral problems.”

Treatment for mouth breathing is available and can be beneficial for children if the condition is caught early. A dentist can check for mouth breathing symptoms and swollen tonsils. If tonsils and/or adenoids are swollen, they can be

surgically removed by an ear-nose-throat (ENT) specialist. If the face and mouth are narrow, dentists can use expansion appliances to help widen the sinuses and open nasal airway passages for greater efficiency in nasal respiration.

“If mouth breathing is treated early, its negative effect on facial and dental development and the medical and social problems associated with it can be reduced or averted,” says Dr. Jefferson.

“After surgery and/or orthodontic intervention, many patients show improvement in behavior, energy level, academic performance, peer acceptance, and growth,” adds Leslie Grant, DDS, spokesperson for the AGD. “Seeking treatment for mouth breathing can significantly improve quality of life.”

Mouth breathing is considered harmful to the dento-oral complex, as it can lead to hypotonicity of the upper lip, hyperactivity of the lower lip, distocclusion, harm to dental growth as well as bone growth, high vault of the palate, xerostomia, and adenoid face. Its co-morbidities include asthma, obesity, snoring, halitosis, chronic ear or sinus infections, temporomandibular joint (TMJ) pain, and obstructive sleep apnea.

Dr. Jefferson notes that his study was presented “in the hope that both health care professionals and the public will become more knowledgeable about and more vigilant in assessing mouth breathing in children and adults, thus alleviating the many emotional, physical, and psychological problems associated with this condition.”