Tonsils and Adenoids

Tonsils and adenoids are masses of tissue similar to the lymph nodes or “glands” found in the neck, groin and armpits. Tonsils are the two masses at the back of the throat. Adenoids are high up in the throat, behind the nose and roof of the mouth (soft palate) and are not visible through the mouth without special instruments.

Tonsils and adenoids are near the entrance to the breathing passages, where they catch incoming germs. They “sample” bacteria and viruses, but can become infected themselves. This happens primarily during the first few years of life, but less frequently with age. Children who have their tonsils and adenoids removed suffer no loss in their resistance.

**What affects tonsils and adenoids?**
The most common problems affecting the tonsils and adenoids are recurrent infections of the throat or ear and significant enlargement or obstruction that causes breathing and swallowing problems.

Abscesses around the tonsils, chronic tonsillitis and infections of small pockets within the tonsils that produce foul-smelling, cheese-like formations can also affect the tonsils and adenoids, making them sore and swollen. Tumors are rare, but can grow on the tonsils.

**How are tonsil and adenoid diseases treated?**
Bacterial infections, especially those caused by streptococcus, are first treated with antibiotics. Sometimes, removal of the tonsils and/or adenoids may be recommended. The two primary reasons for removal are recurrent infection despite antibiotic therapy and difficulty breathing due to enlarged tonsils and/or adenoids.

Chronic infection can affect other areas, such as the eustachian tube, the passage between the back of the nose and the inside of the ear. This can lead to frequent ear infections and potential hearing loss.

Recent studies indicate adenoidectomy may be a beneficial treatment for some children with chronic earaches accompanied by fluid in the middle ear (otitis media with effusion).

**Tonsillitis and Its Symptoms**
Tonsillitis is an infection in one or both tonsils. Signs and symptoms are:

- A white or yellow coating on the tonsils
- A slight voice change due to swelling
- Sore throat
- Uncomfortable or painful swallowing
- Swollen lymph nodes (glands) in the neck
- Fever
- Bad breath
- Swelling of the tonsils

**Enlarged Adenoids and Their Symptoms**
If your adenoids are enlarged, it may be hard to breathe through the nose. Other signs of constant enlargement are:
- Breathing through the mouth instead of the nose most of the time
- Nose sounds “blocked” when the person speaks
- Noisy breathing during the day
- Recurrent ear infections
- Snoring at night
- Breathing stops for a few seconds at night during snoring or loud breathing (sleep apnea)

**Surgery**
For at least two weeks before any surgery, the patient should refrain from taking aspirin or other medications containing aspirin. (Children should never be given aspirin because of the risk of developing Reye’s syndrome).

- If the patient or patient’s family has had any problems with anesthesia, the surgeon should be informed. If the patient is taking any other medications, has sickle cell anemia, has a bleeding disorder, is pregnant, has concerns about the transfusion of blood or has used steroids in the past year, the surgeon should be informed.
- A blood test and possibly a urine test may be required prior to surgery.
- Generally, after midnight prior to the operation, nothing should be taken by mouth, including chewing gum, mouthwashes, throat lozenges, toothpaste or water. Anything in the stomach may be vomited when anesthesia is induced, and this is dangerous.

Your ENT specialist will provide you with the details of pre-operative and post-operative care and answer any questions you may have.

**After Surgery**
There are several postoperative symptoms that may arise. These include, but are not limited to, swallowing problems, vomiting, fever, throat pain and ear pain. Occasionally, bleeding may occur after surgery. If the patient has any bleeding, your surgeon should be notified immediately.