

# Obstructive Sleep Apnea in Orthodontics

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## Abstract

Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) is a significant medical condition characterized by repeated episodes of partial or complete obstruction of the upper airway during sleep. This disorder affects millions globally and is associated with serious health consequences, including cardiovascular disease, metabolic dysfunction, and impaired quality of life. The craniofacial structure plays a pivotal role in airway patency, making orthodontic interventions critical in the management of OSA. This review aims to explore the role of orthodontics in the diagnosis, management, and treatment of OSA. It examines the pathophysiology of OSA, highlighting the anatomical and functional factors contributing to airway obstruction. The clinical presentation and diagnostic methods, including polysomnography and home sleep apnea testing, are discussed. Orthodontic treatment options such as rapid maxillary expansion, mandibular advancement devices, and surgical interventions like maxillomandibular advancement are evaluated for their efficacy in improving airway patency and reducing apnea episodes. The review also underscores the importance of a multidisciplinary approach, integrating orthodontic care with other treatments such as continuous positive airway pressure and weight management strategies. Emerging trends in imaging technologies and genetic research are considered, paving the way for personalized orthodontic interventions. This comprehensive analysis highlights the critical role of orthodontics in enhancing the quality of life for OSA patients through targeted and effective treatment strategies.

**Keywords:** Mandibular advancement devices, Obstructive sleep apnea, Orthodontic interventions.

## INTRODUCTION

Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) is a prevalent disorder affecting millions globally. It is associated with serious health consequences, including cardiovascular disease, metabolic dysfunction, and impaired quality of life.<sup>[1]</sup> The role of orthodontics in managing OSA has gained increasing attention, given the influence of craniofacial structure on airway patency. This review delves into the orthodontic perspectives of OSA management, examining current practices and emerging trends.

## PATHOPHYSIOLOGY OF OSA

OSA results from the collapse of the upper airway during sleep, leading to intermittent hypoxia and fragmented sleep. Factors contributing to airway obstruction include anatomical abnormalities, neuromuscular control deficits, and increased soft tissue volume. Orthodontic evaluations often reveal specific craniofacial features associated with OSA, such as retrognathia, narrow maxilla, and high-arched palate.<sup>[2]</sup> These structural anomalies can compromise the airway space, exacerbating the risk of airway collapse during sleep.

The airway's patency is maintained by a balance of forces from surrounding muscles and structures. In individuals with OSA, this balance is disrupted, leading to airway collapse when the dilator muscles relax during sleep. The repetitive nature of this collapse causes significant physiological stress, contributing to the development of comorbidities such as hypertension, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases.<sup>[3]</sup>

## ANATOMICAL FACTORS

Anatomical abnormalities play a crucial role in the development of OSA. Key craniofacial structures influencing airway patency include the size and position of the mandible and maxilla, tongue size, tonsil size, and the overall configuration of the soft tissues surrounding the airway. Patients with OSA often exhibit specific anatomical features such as retrognathia

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(recessed jaw), micrognathia (small jaw), a narrow maxilla, and a high-arched palate.<sup>[4]</sup>

The upper airway, composed of the nasopharynx, oropharynx, and hypopharynx, is susceptible to collapse due to the lack of rigid support structures like those found in the trachea. This susceptibility is exacerbated in individuals with excess soft tissue, such as enlarged tonsils or adenoids, which can further narrow the airway lumen.<sup>[5]</sup> In addition, obesity is a significant risk factor for OSA, as increased adipose tissue deposits around the neck and pharyngeal structures contribute to airway narrowing and collapsibility.<sup>[6]</sup>

## NEUROMUSCULAR FACTORS

Neuromuscular control of the upper airway muscles is essential for maintaining airway patency during sleep. The primary dilator muscles of the upper airway, including the genioglossus, tensor palatini, and levator palatini, help to stabilize and enlarge the airway lumen during inspiration.<sup>[7]</sup> In individuals with OSA, there is often a dysfunction in the neuromuscular control of these muscles, leading to inadequate activation and subsequent airway collapse during sleep.

During wakefulness, the activity of these dilator muscles is sufficient to keep the airway open. However, during sleep, especially during the rapid eye movement stage, muscle tone decreases, making the airway more prone to collapse. This reduction in muscle tone, combined with the anatomical predisposition, results in repeated episodes of partial or complete obstruction.<sup>[8]</sup>

## PHYSIOLOGICAL FACTORS

Several physiological factors contribute to the pathophysiology of OSA, including increased airway resistance, ventilatory instability, and altered respiratory control mechanisms. Increased airway resistance occurs due to the narrowing of the upper airway, requiring greater effort to maintain airflow. This increased resistance leads to higher negative intrathoracic pressures during inspiration, further promoting airway collapse.<sup>[9]</sup>

Ventilatory instability, characterized by fluctuating levels of respiratory drive, also plays a role in OSA. This instability can result from altered chemoreceptor sensitivity to carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) and oxygen (O<sub>2</sub>) levels. During episodes of apnea, CO<sub>2</sub> levels rise, and O<sub>2</sub> levels fall, stimulating a compensatory increase in ventilatory effort upon airway reopening. However, this heightened effort can overshoot, leading to hyperventilation and a subsequent drop in CO<sub>2</sub> levels, which can trigger another cycle of apnea.<sup>[10]</sup>

## SYSTEMIC EFFECTS OF INTERMITTENT HYPOXIA

The intermittent hypoxia and sleep fragmentation associated with OSA have profound systemic effects. Recurrent episodes of hypoxia and reoxygenation lead to oxidative stress, inflammation, and sympathetic nervous system

activation. These processes contribute to the development of cardiovascular and metabolic comorbidities commonly observed in OSA patients.<sup>[11]</sup>

Oxidative stress results from the imbalance between the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and the body's antioxidant defenses. The repeated hypoxia-reoxygenation cycles in OSA enhance ROS production, causing cellular and tissue damage. This oxidative stress, in turn, promotes inflammation, characterized by elevated levels of inflammatory cytokines such as interleukin-6 and tumor necrosis factor- $\alpha$ .<sup>[12]</sup>

Sympathetic nervous system activation is another significant consequence of intermittent hypoxia. The frequent arousals from sleep stimulate the release of catecholamines, leading to increased heart rate, blood pressure, and vasoconstriction. Chronic sympathetic activation contributes to the development of hypertension and other cardiovascular conditions, including atrial fibrillation and heart failure.<sup>[13]</sup>

## IMPACT ON CRANIOFACIAL DEVELOPMENT

In children, OSA can impact craniofacial development, leading to a vicious cycle of worsening airway obstruction. Chronic mouth breathing due to nasal obstruction can alter normal craniofacial growth patterns, resulting in longer lower facial height, narrow maxillary arches, and dental malocclusions.<sup>[14]</sup> These changes further predispose children to persistent OSA and associated complications.

## CLINICAL PRESENTATION AND DIAGNOSIS

OSA is a condition characterized by repeated episodes of partial or complete obstruction of the upper airway during sleep, leading to disrupted sleep and intermittent hypoxia. The clinical presentation of OSA varies widely among individuals, often depending on the severity of the condition, the presence of comorbidities, and individual physiological differences. Accurate diagnosis is crucial for effective management and treatment.

## CLINICAL PRESENTATION

The hallmark symptoms of OSA include loud snoring, witnessed apneas, and excessive daytime sleepiness (EDS). However, the clinical presentation can be multifaceted, encompassing a range of symptoms and signs.

1. **Snoring:** One of the most common and noticeable symptoms of OSA is loud, habitual snoring. This occurs due to the vibration of the soft tissues in the upper airway as air passes through a narrowed airway. Snoring is often reported by bed partners and can be a social nuisance.<sup>[1]</sup>
2. **Witnessed apneas:** Apneas, or pauses in breathing, are typically observed by a bed partner or family member. These apneic episodes are often followed by a choking or gasping sound as the individual partially awakens to resume breathing.<sup>[2]</sup>

3. EDS: EDS is a significant symptom of OSA and results from fragmented sleep caused by repeated apneas and hypopneas. Patients often report feeling excessively sleepy during the day, experiencing unintentional naps, and having difficulty maintaining wakefulness in quiet situations<sup>[15]</sup>
4. Morning headaches: Many individuals with OSA experience morning headaches, which are believed to result from nocturnal hypoxia and hypercapnia, leading to cerebral vasodilation<sup>[16]</sup>
5. Cognitive and mood disturbances: OSA can lead to a range of cognitive impairments, including difficulties with attention, concentration, memory, and executive function. Mood disturbances such as irritability, depression, and anxiety are also common<sup>[17]</sup>
6. Nocturia: Frequent nighttime urination, or nocturia, is often reported by patients with OSA. This symptom is thought to result from the increased production of atrial natriuretic peptide due to the negative intrathoracic pressures generated during apneic events<sup>[18]</sup>
7. Cardiovascular symptoms: OSA is associated with cardiovascular symptoms such as hypertension, heart palpitations, and, in severe cases, nocturnal angina. The repetitive hypoxia and arousals activate the sympathetic nervous system, contributing to these cardiovascular manifestations.<sup>[11]</sup>
4. Berlin questionnaire: The Berlin questionnaire is a validated screening tool that assesses the risk of OSA based on self-reported snoring, daytime sleepiness, and the presence of hypertension or obesity. Patients are categorized into high or low risk for OSA based on their responses<sup>[21]</sup>
5. Mallampati classification: The Mallampati classification is used to assess the visibility of the structures in the oral cavity and can help predict the likelihood of OSA. A higher Mallampati score (class III or IV) indicates a higher risk of OSA due to a more crowded oropharynx<sup>[22]</sup>
6. Craniofacial and dental evaluation: Orthodontists and dentists play a crucial role in identifying craniofacial abnormalities associated with OSA. Detailed evaluations can reveal features such as retrognathia, narrow maxilla, and high-arched palate, which contribute to airway obstruction<sup>[14]</sup>
7. Imaging studies: Imaging techniques, such as cephalometric radiographs and cone-beam computed tomography (CBCT), provide detailed views of the craniofacial structures and airway dimensions. These studies help in identifying anatomical contributors to OSA and planning appropriate orthodontic or surgical interventions.<sup>[23]</sup>

## DIAGNOSIS

The diagnosis of OSA involves a combination of clinical evaluation, patient history, and objective sleep studies. Key diagnostic tools and methods include:

1. Polysomnography (PSG): PSG is the gold standard for diagnosing OSA. This comprehensive sleep study involves overnight monitoring of various physiological parameters, including electroencephalography to assess sleep stages, electrooculography to monitor eye movements, electromyography to measure muscle activity, airflow, respiratory effort, and oxygen saturation.<sup>[8]</sup> PSG provides detailed information on the frequency and severity of apneas and hypopneas, as well as associated changes in sleep architecture
2. Home sleep apnea testing (HSAT): HSAT is an alternative to in-lab PSG and involves the use of portable monitoring devices that patients can use at home. These devices typically measure airflow, respiratory effort, and oxygen saturation but may not provide as comprehensive data as PSG.<sup>[19]</sup> HSAT is convenient and cost-effective, making it suitable for patients with a high pretest probability of moderate-to-severe OSA
3. Epworth sleepiness scale (ESS): The ESS is a subjective measure used to assess the severity of daytime sleepiness. Patients rate their likelihood of falling asleep in various situations on a scale from 0 to 3, with higher scores indicating greater sleepiness.<sup>[20]</sup> While the ESS is not diagnostic, it provides valuable information on the impact of OSA on daytime functioning.

## INTEGRATING CLINICAL FINDINGS

Effective diagnosis of OSA requires integrating findings from patient history, physical examination, and diagnostic tests to establish an accurate diagnosis of OSA. This process includes:

1. Correlation of symptoms and objective data: Correlate the patient's reported symptoms with objective data from PSG or HSAT. For example, EDS and observed apneas should align with elevated apnea-hypopnea index (AHI) scores and evidence of oxygen desaturation during sleep<sup>[10]</sup>
2. Assessment of comorbidities: Consider the presence of comorbid conditions, such as hypertension and obesity, which may exacerbate OSA symptoms and influence treatment decisions<sup>[24]</sup>
3. Identification of anatomical factors: Use craniofacial and imaging assessments to identify anatomical factors contributing to airway obstruction. This information is crucial for determining appropriate orthodontic or surgical interventions<sup>[14]</sup>
4. Comprehensive evaluation: Conduct a multidisciplinary evaluation involving sleep specialists, ENT surgeons, and orthodontists to ensure a holistic approach to diagnosis and treatment. Collaborative care can enhance the accuracy of diagnosis and the effectiveness of treatment plans.<sup>[25]</sup>

## ORTHODONTIC INTERVENTIONS IN OSA MANAGEMENT

Orthodontic treatment options for OSA include:

### Rapid maxillary expansion (RME)

Effective in pediatric patients, RME widens the maxillary arch, improving nasal breathing and reducing airway resistance. This

procedure involves the use of a fixed appliance that gradually expands the mid-palatal suture, leading to an increase in nasal cavity volume and a decrease in nasal airway resistance. Studies have shown that RME can significantly reduce the severity of OSA in children, with long-term benefits in respiratory function.<sup>[26]</sup>

### **Mandibular advancement devices (MADs)**

These oral appliances advance the mandible forward, increasing airway space and reducing apneas. MADs are custom-fitted devices that reposition the lower jaw, tongue, and soft tissues to prevent airway collapse during sleep.<sup>[27]</sup> They are particularly effective in patients with mild-to-moderate OSA and those who cannot tolerate continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) therapy. MADs have been shown to improve sleep quality, reduce snoring, and decrease the AHI. Their use is particularly beneficial for patients who exhibit mild-to-moderate OSA and those who are unable to tolerate CPAP therapy due to discomfort or inconvenience.<sup>[28]</sup> MADs are designed to be worn during sleep, and their efficacy is often dependent on proper fitting and regular adjustments to ensure optimal jaw positioning.<sup>[29]</sup>

### **Surgical interventions**

For patients with severe OSA or those who do not respond adequately to non-invasive treatments, surgical interventions may be necessary. Maxillomandibular advancement (MMA) is one of the most effective surgical procedures for treating OSA. This procedure involves the surgical repositioning of the maxilla and mandible forward, thereby increasing the posterior airway space and reducing the likelihood of airway collapse.<sup>[30]</sup> MMA has been shown to provide substantial and sustained improvements in OSA severity, overall quality of life, and reduction in cardiovascular risk.<sup>[31]</sup>

Other surgical options include uvulopalatopharyngoplasty, which involves removing excess tissue from the throat to widen the airway, and genioglossus advancement, which aims to reposition the tongue muscle attachment to prevent airway obstruction. These procedures can be effective in selected patients, particularly when anatomical abnormalities contribute significantly to airway obstruction.<sup>[32]</sup>

## **ROLE OF ORTHODONTICS IN MULTIDISCIPLINARY OSA MANAGEMENT**

The management of OSA requires a collaborative approach involving various healthcare professionals, including sleep specialists, ENT surgeons, and orthodontists. Orthodontic interventions can play a crucial role in complementing other treatments such as CPAP and weight management strategies, thus enhancing overall treatment efficacy.<sup>[33]</sup>

CPAP remains the standard treatment for OSA, delivering continuous positive pressure to keep the airway open during sleep. However, patient adherence to CPAP therapy can be challenging due to discomfort and inconvenience. Orthodontic interventions, such as MADs and RME, offer

viable alternatives or adjunctive treatments, particularly in patients with anatomical abnormalities contributing to airway obstruction.<sup>[34]</sup> These interventions can significantly improve patient compliance and overall treatment outcomes.

Weight management is another crucial aspect of OSA management, as obesity is a significant risk factor for the condition. Orthodontists can collaborate with nutritionists and other healthcare providers to support patients in achieving and maintaining a healthy weight, thereby reducing the severity of OSA.<sup>[35]</sup> In addition, lifestyle modifications, including regular exercise and dietary changes, can complement orthodontic and other medical treatments, leading to better overall health outcomes.

## **EMERGING TRENDS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Advancements in imaging technologies, such as CBCT, have significantly improved the precision of orthodontic diagnosis and treatment planning in OSA patients. CBCT provides detailed 3D images of the craniofacial structures, allowing for accurate assessment of airway dimensions and identification of anatomical abnormalities.<sup>[23]</sup> This technology enhances the ability to tailor orthodontic interventions to the specific needs of each patient, improving treatment outcomes.

Research continues to explore the genetic and epigenetic factors influencing OSA, paving the way for personalized orthodontic interventions. Genetic predispositions to craniofacial abnormalities and airway characteristics can inform the development of targeted therapies, potentially improving the efficacy of orthodontic treatments.<sup>[36]</sup> Understanding these genetic factors can lead to more personalized treatment plans, improving outcomes and patient satisfaction.

In addition, advancements in 3D printing and custom-fabricated orthodontic appliances are emerging as promising tools in the treatment of OSA. These technologies allow for the creation of highly customized devices tailored to the patient's unique anatomical features, potentially enhancing the effectiveness of orthodontic interventions.<sup>[37]</sup>

Telemedicine and remote monitoring technologies are also becoming increasingly important in the management of OSA. These tools enable continuous monitoring of treatment efficacy and patient adherence, allowing for timely adjustments to treatment plans and improved patient outcomes.<sup>[38]</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

Orthodontics plays a vital role in the comprehensive management of OSA, offering non-invasive and surgical options to improve airway patency and patient outcomes. Continued research and interdisciplinary collaboration are essential to optimize treatment strategies and enhance the quality of life for OSA patients. By integrating orthodontic care into the broader framework of OSA management, healthcare providers can deliver more effective, patient-centered care.

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