
5 WAYS YOU CAN

HELP YOUR
PATIENTS' SLEEP
AND HEALTH

A Guide for Dentists on
Improving The Sleep Habits
of Their Patients



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 NATIONAL SLEEP FOUNDATION

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About the National Sleep Foundation

A Sleep Guide For Dentists

Sleep, just like diet and exercise, is important to your patients' health. While the foods your patients choose can affect the health of their teeth and gums, your patients' nighttime dental habits can affect their sleep health.

This guide will help you start a sleep-focused conversation with your patients, so that you can take a comprehensive approach to helping them improve their health and well-being.

In this guide, we will explain five ways you as a dentist can help improve your patients' sleep and overall health.

Let's get started!

1

Ask Patients About Their Overall Sleep Health

Many patients might be surprised to hear that their dentist cares about how well they sleep. Besides helping them with harmful nighttime dental habits such as teeth grinding, TMJ and jaw clenching, you can also help them identify potentially serious breathing problems that lead to poor sleep and health.

Questions to Ask

- “How would you rate your sleep overall?”
- “In the past week, how many days did you wake up in the morning feeling rested?”
- “In the past week, do you remember waking up during the night?”

These questions give you an overall picture of their sleep health and can help you identify potential problems. If your patient is satisfied with their sleep and most often feels rested, you know that’s a good indicator of their sleep health. If they are overall not satisfied with their sleep health, find themselves sleepy most mornings, or wake up often during the night, there may be an underlying problem.

2

Ask Patients if They Snore

Ask your patients if they, or anyone in their family, snores.

If they know that they snore, how often?

- Every night?
- 3-4 times a week?
- 1-2 times a week?

Asking your patients if they snore is just as important as asking routine questions such as “How often do you brush?”

Snoring and loud breathing during sleep affects approximately 90 million American adults on a regular basis. While snoring can affect anyone, men and those that are overweight have a greater risk to snore. Additionally, snoring may become more frequent as people age.

This can lead to unrefreshing sleep and daytime sleepiness for your patients and their bed partners. The two most common adverse health effects that are believed to be casually linked to snoring are daytime dysfunction and heart disease. About one-half of people who snore loudly have obstructive sleep apnea.

A good resource on snoring for patients can be found on our website:
>> [Snoring and Sleep](#)

3

Recognize the Signs of Sleep Disorders

Snoring can be related to Obstructive Sleep Apnea (OSA), a serious breathing disorder.

About one-half of people who snore OSA, but unfortunately, 95% of those with OSA go undiagnosed.

Dentists play an increasing role in the recognition & diagnosis of OSA but in a recent study of 500 dentists, 58% could not identify signs and symptoms. OSA is characterized by pauses in breathing longer than 10 seconds while asleep. This causes a lack of oxygen in the blood that can have negative effects throughout the body.

For more information, please visit our [Sleep Apnea page](#).)

—Signs of Sleep Disorders—

(cont'd)

Other Signs a Sleep Disorder May Be Present

- Bruxism / Tooth Wear
- GERD
- Narrow Maxilla / High Palate
- Loss of the Gag Reflex
- Headaches
- Mouth Breathing Habit
- Orofacial pain
- Coated Tongue / Scalloped Tongue
- Crossbite
- Malocclusion / Dental Crowding
- Abfraction / Cervical Erosion / Recession
- Tongue Thrust



4

Education and Making a Referral

The first step in treating a patient for their potential sleep disorder is simply explaining what you see. Describe the symptoms you have observed that are concerning and tell them why.

Teeth grinding may be able to be resolved with efforts to reduce stress levels, a regular soothing bedtime routine, a cool and comfortable bedroom, or relaxation techniques.

Other problems, such as obstructive sleep apnea, need to be formally diagnosed by a doctor or specialist that is licensed in sleep medicine. Patients with OSA will likely be referred for a “polysomnogram” or *sleep study*, where their vital signs and behaviors will be closely monitored as they sleep.

Partnering with sleep specialists in your area is a good team-based approach to your patient’s care and sleep health.

5

Ongoing Treatment and Collaboration

To help manage your patient's sleep disorder, you will likely need to work ongoing with the patient and, if necessary, their sleep specialist.

If your patient has a sleep disorder such as OSA, there are several treatment options that may be prescribed:

- **Continuous Positive Airway Pressure** (CPAP device): A mask that keeps air flowing in the nose during sleep.
- **Dental appliance**: Draws the lower jaw forward and keeps the tongue from blocking the airway. There are many different types of dental appliances that can treat OSA. It's important for you to familiarize yourself with the different types, so that you can best help each patient.

You can learn more about oral appliance treatment options on our blog: [Oral Appliances: Another Sleep Apnea Treatment Option](#)

Starting a sleep-focused approach with your patients on their next visit can lead to many benefits for them.

A status check on their sleep health, awareness of signs of a sleep disorder, and the proper education or referral of your patients can help them increase their health, provide relief and improve their lifestyle.

About the National Sleep Foundation

The National Sleep Foundation (NSF) is dedicated to improving health and well-being through sleep education and advocacy. It is well-known for its annual Sleep in America® poll. The Foundation is a charitable, educational and scientific not-for-profit organization located in Washington, DC. Its membership includes researchers and clinicians focused on sleep medicine, health professionals, patients, families affected by drowsy driving and more than 900 healthcare facilities.

Do you know about the National Sleep Foundation Membership?

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