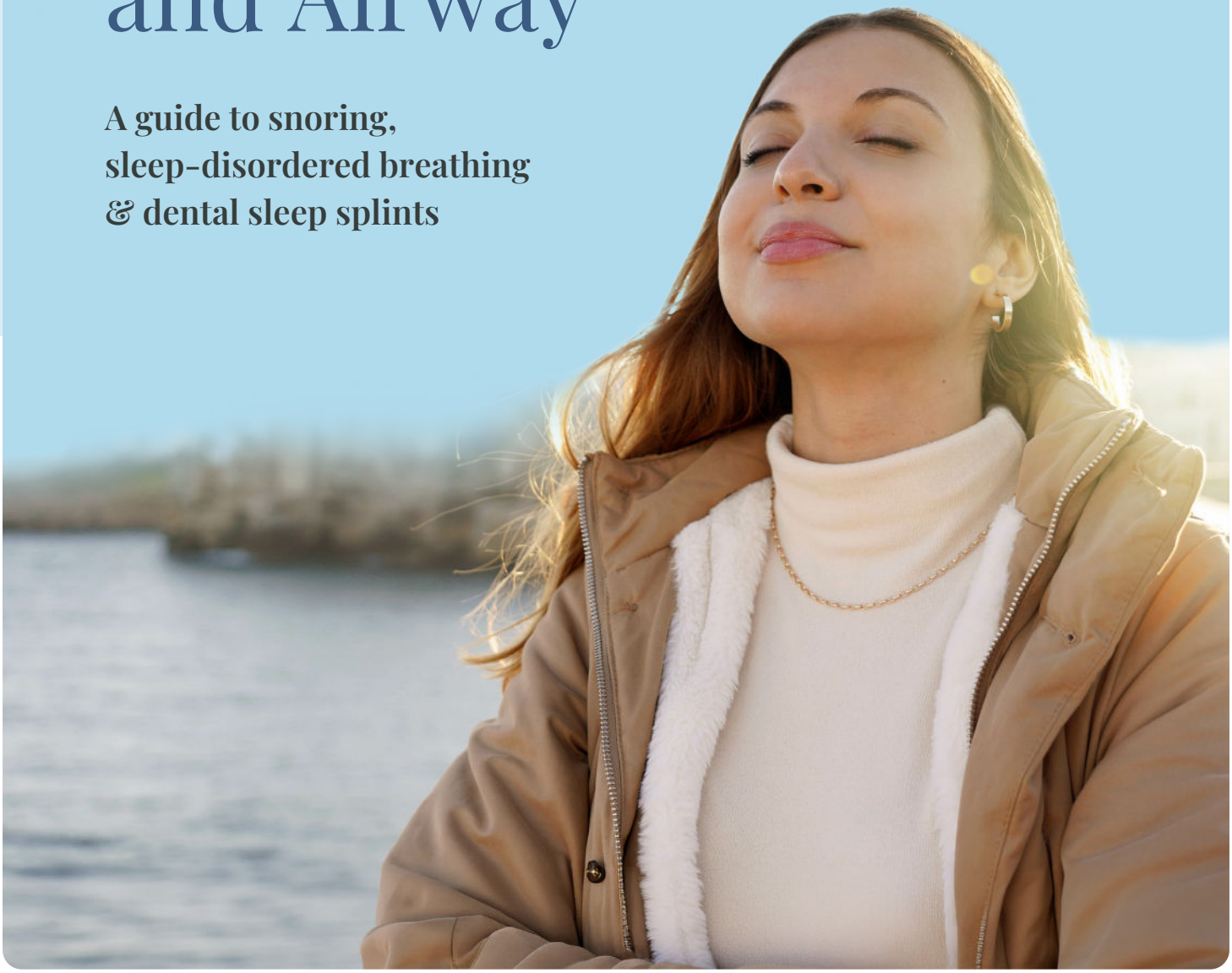
Guide

Better Sleep Starts with Understanding your Jaw and Airway

A guide to snoring, sleep-disordered breathing & dental sleep splints



TMJ CLINICS

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Are you losing sleep?

Sleep is vital for your health and wellbeing. While you're snoozing, your body is busy carrying out important processes that support your brain function, cardiovascular health, metabolism, immune function, tissue repair, concentration, and emotional regulation.

The occasional bad night might make you a bit grumpy and forgetful, but long-term sleep deprivation can **increase your risk** of heart problems, diabetes and obesity. It can also make you more prone to infections and lead to depression and anxiety.

Sleep quantity and **quality** both matter:

- **Quantity:** Most adults need 7-9 hours of sleep per night.
- **Quality:** Falling asleep within 30 minutes and rarely awakening during sleep.

"Awakening" may mean being fully awake, such as when you get up to go to the bathroom during the night. However, that's not the only meaning. It can also refer to brief disturbances in your sleep that occur when your **breathing is repeatedly interrupted**. You probably won't remember those brief awakenings, but they can leave you feeling tired, foggy or unrefreshed the next day.

Are you experiencing any of these signs of poor sleep quality?

NIGHTTIME SYMPTOMS	DAYTIME SYMPTOMS
Snoring	Excessive sleepiness or fatigue
Pauses in breathing	Waking up with a headache, dry mouth or sore throat
Waking up gasping	Trouble concentrating
Needing to urinate frequently overnight	High blood pressure

Book a sleep & snoring assessment at TMJ Clinics

2 Understanding sleep-disordered breathing

Sleep-disordered breathing describes a spectrum of conditions in which airflow is disrupted during sleep.

When you fall asleep, there's a drop in muscle tone throughout your body – that's why a sleeping toddler feels so floppy when you pick them up.

The muscles in your tongue and throat naturally relax too. For most people, that doesn't cause issues. However, your airway may become too narrow for easy breathing during sleep if it is already naturally quite narrow or if the position of your jaw and tongue reduces the space for airflow.

Throat muscles relax
Including those that hold the airway open

→

Airway narrows
Less room for air to move freely

→

Airflow restricted or blocked
Breathing is partially or fully interrupted

→

Body briefly rouses
Reopens the airway, often without you waking

→

Sleep becomes fragmented
Without enough deep restorative rest

↞ Repeat dozens of times a night ↠

The result? Anything from snoring to **obstructive sleep apnoea** (OSA).

Snoring

Snoring happens when air moves through a narrowed upper airway, making the surrounding tissues vibrate.

Not everyone who snores has sleep apnoea. However, regular loud snoring should be investigated, particularly when it occurs alongside other signs such as pauses in breathing, waking gasping or choking, daytime sleepiness or waking unrefreshed.

Often, the first person to notice is the one sleeping beside you.

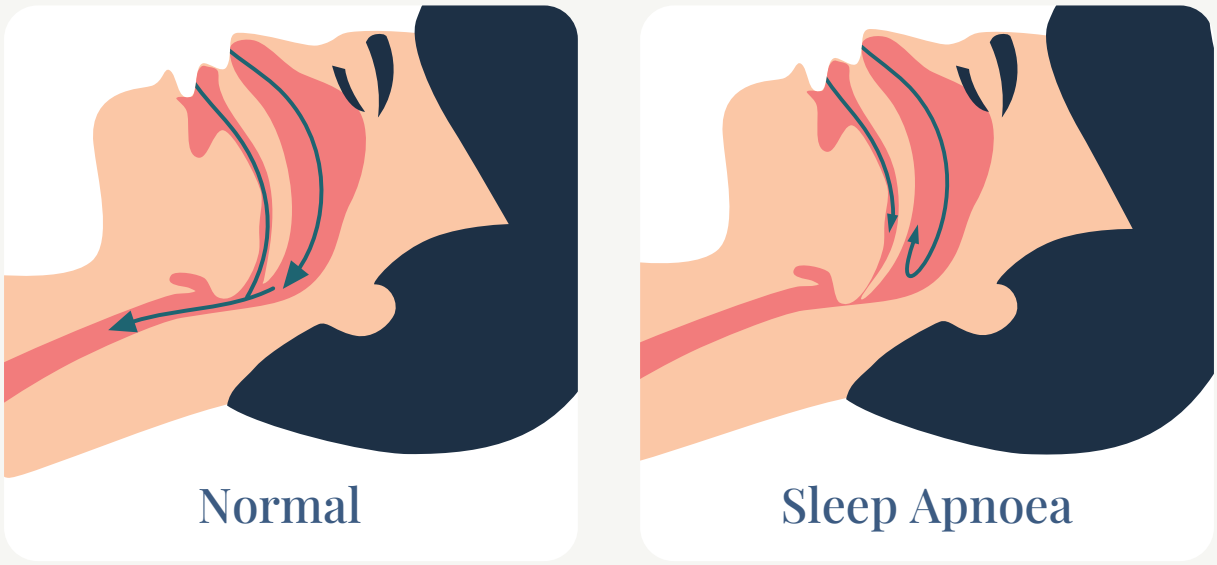
30%
of Australian adults are affected by snoring

1 in 5

Australians are affected by Obstructive Sleep Apnoea (OSA).

Obstructive sleep apnoea

In OSA, the airway narrows further or repeatedly closes, reducing or temporarily stopping airflow.



The severity of OSA is commonly measured using the apnoea–hypopnoea index (AHI), which records the number of breathing disturbances per hour of sleep. This is measured during an overnight sleep study.

OSA severity scores in adults:

Mild OSA	Moderate OSA	Severe OSA
5-14 breathing events per hour	15-29 breathing events per hour	30+ breathing events per hour

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Where does the jaw come into this?

You may already know **TMJ Clinics** for helping people manage temporomandibular disorders (TMD), including jaw pain, clicking, locking and teeth grinding. What you may not know is that we also practice sleep dentistry, a field focused on the relationship between the jaw, airway and sleep.

Your jaw does more than help you chew and speak. The size and position of your lower jaw, tongue and surrounding soft tissues **influence the dimensions of your upper airway and your risk of OSA**. To put it another way, if your lower jaw sits further back, that may mean there's less space behind your tongue. Once your tongue and throat muscles relax during sleep, that space may get even smaller, which can lead to snoring or sleep apnoea.

Sleep-disordered breathing has many possible contributing factors, but the jaw is certainly one of them.



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Sleep and snoring assessments at TMJ Clinics

TMJ Clinics now offers a **sleep and snoring assessment** - a close examination of all factors contributing to your symptoms. If indicated, we may ask you to undertake a level 3, at-home sleep study to track your breathing during sleep.

The aim is to understand what may be contributing to your symptoms and what to do next. Some people have a combination of TMJ symptoms and sleep issues, so a comprehensive assessment is needed to determine the best treatment option.

Consultation

- A 1-hour appointment with a dentist at TMJ Clinics
- Discussion of your sleep symptoms
- Questionnaire
- Physical examination of your jaw and airway-related anatomy.

Level 3 at-home sleep testing (if appropriate)

Lightweight wireless monitor worn overnight on the forehead:

- Tracks breathing patterns
- Monitors blood oxygen levels and pulse rate
- Records snoring and head position
- Measures wake-ups via brain wave monitoring (EEG).

Conducted in the comfort of your own bed:

- Avoids an overnight stay in a sleep lab

Guided next steps

- Explanation of your results
- For snoring and mild sleep apnoea, an oral sleep splint (mandibular advancement splint) is often appropriate
- Our physiotherapists can also assist with managing your sleep-disordered breathing
- If screening indicates moderate to severe sleep apnoea, we will recommend referral for further investigation and management.



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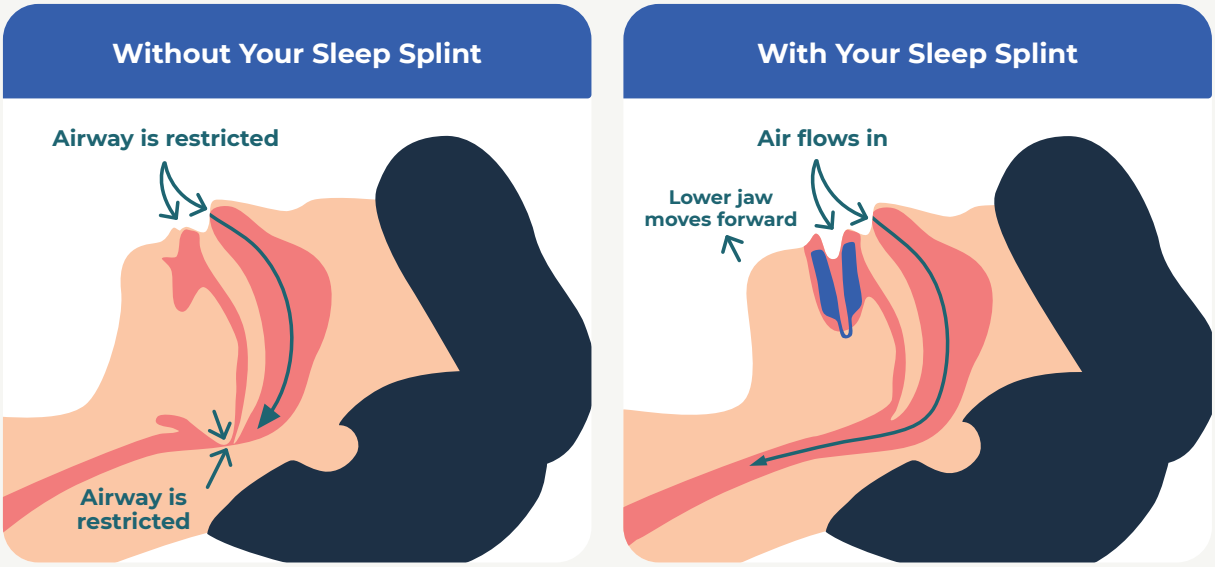
Treating mild sleep-disordered breathing

CPAP therapy is generally recommended for moderate to severe sleep-disordered breathing. However, for snoring or mild sleep-disordered breathing, you may benefit from a sleep splint.

What is a sleep splint?

A sleep splint is more formally called a mandibular advancement splint (MAS) or mandibular advancement device (MAD).

It resembles a dental mouthguard but is carefully designed to hold your lower jaw slightly forward while you sleep. This positioning helps to **create more room in your upper airway,** reducing the risk of sleep-disordered breathing.



A sleep splint is quite different from a TMJ splint, which is prescribed to reduce load on your temporomandibular joints. The two devices may look similar to the untrained eye, but their design and purpose are quite different.

A sleep splint may be worth considering if you:



Snore



Have mild sleep apnoea (less than 15 hypoxic events per hr)



Find it hard to use a CPAP machine consistently



Use a CPAP machine but need another option for travel.

What's involved with creating a sleep splint?

Your TMJ Clinics dentist will take measurements of your jaw and a scan your teeth

Your splint is ordered through an accurate and efficient digital process

Your customised splint is created with 3D printed nylon and is vapor polished to make the surface extra smooth

3D printed nylon splints are lightweight and strong, to ensure a comfortable nights sleep

Getting used to wearing your sleep splint

Put the splint in shortly before bed rather than wearing it for long periods while awake.

Wear your sleep splint exactly as your TMJ clinician recommends. Consistent use can make the appliance feel more familiar over time.

Expect an adjustment period. Mild jaw or tooth awareness can occur when you first start wearing a new appliance, but please let us know if you're experiencing significant or persistent discomfort.

Physiotherapy can help you adjust to wearing your new splint by releasing tight muscles and prescribing targeted exercises to support your airway.

Clean it regularly, following the instructions provided.

Bring your splint to follow-up appointments so we can see how well it is working for you.



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Ready to look more closely at your sleep?

Good sleep supports your quality of life. When you're less irritable, your relationships are likely to be better. When you're more focused, you're likely to perform better in your job. When your immune system, metabolism and cardiovascular system are in good shape, you're likely to enjoy better health and wellbeing.

So, don't put up with poor sleep. A sleep and snoring assessment at TMJ Clinics can help identify what is contributing to your symptoms, and whether a sleep splint or referral to a sleep physician is the more appropriate next step.

Step 1

Book & Assess

Unlike traditional sleep clinics with long waitlists, TMJ Clinics offers prompt appointments to assess sleep concerns.

Step 2

At-Home Sleep Study

No overnight stays, conducted in the comfort of your own bed.

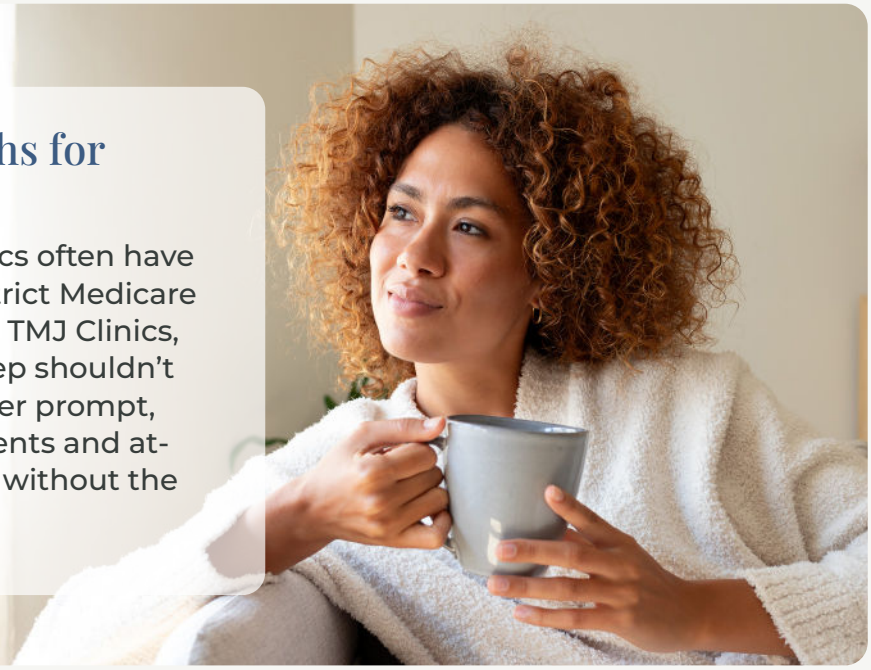
Step 3

Tailored Plan

Explanation of results and guided next steps.

Why wait months for a sleep study?

Standard sleep clinics often have long waitlists and strict Medicare eligibility criteria. At TMJ Clinics, we believe poor sleep shouldn't have to wait. We offer prompt, accessible assessments and at-home sleep studies without the long delays.



TMJ Clinics can be found in **many Australian cities**, including Adelaide, Brisbane, Gold Coast, Canberra, Melbourne, West Melbourne, Bankstown, Kogarah, North Sydney, Norwest and Newcastle.

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Disclaimer
All information is general and not intended as a substitute for professional advice.