

SLEEP AND NEURODIVERGENCE · 12.8

ADHD, Sleep Apnoea and the Sleep Disorders Frequently Missed

Obstructive sleep apnoea is significantly over-represented in adults with ADHD, somewhat over-represented in autistic adults, and routinely missed in both. Several other sleep disorders sit in a similar pattern.

FOR

Adults with ADHD or autism whose sleep symptoms persist

AUDIENCE AGE

18+

REVIEWED

18 May 2026

PART OF

The NeuroFX resource library

IN SUMMARY

ADHD, Sleep Apnoea and the Sleep Disorders Frequently Missed

Why sleep apnoea is the most-missed

- **The rate is materially higher than the general population.** Sedky 2014 documented the strong paediatric link; the adult picture follows and is widely reported clinically. Higher obesity rates, heavier alcohol use and disrupted sleep schedules all stack up in adults with ADHD.
- **The symptoms mimic ADHD.** Daytime sleepiness, difficulty concentrating, memory problems, mood changes, morning headaches. A clinician taking a history from a 50-year-old on ADHD medication may not think to ask about snoring.
- **Treatment often produces substantial improvement.** Many adults with ADHD on long-term stimulant treatment with incomplete response turn out to have undiagnosed OSA. Treating it often produces more improvement than further medication adjustment.

What else to know

- **Restless legs and PLMD are over-represented.** The discomfort is real, often not recognised as a separate clinical picture, often treatable. Iron deficiency is a common contributor; some adults respond to iron repletion alone.
- **Narcolepsy spectrum and idiopathic hypersomnia are rarer but worth knowing.** Excessive daytime sleepiness that does not respond to expected interventions, particularly with cataplexy, warrants specialist sleep medicine assessment.
- **Parasomnias and insufficient sleep syndrome.** Sleepwalking, night terrors, REM behaviour disorder; insufficient sleep that does not respond to "just go to bed earlier". All warrant assessment when significant or persistent.
- **Autistic adults have sensory considerations.** Polysomnography and CPAP can be sensory-hostile. An autism-literate sleep clinician is in a different category; ask explicitly about sensory adjustments.
- **STOP-BANG is the screening tool.** Eight yes-no questions; freely available. A score of 3 or more flags moderate OSA risk; 5 or more flags high risk. Bringing a completed STOP-BANG to your GP gets the conversation started.

How we can help

- **GP for the assessment pathway.** For suspected OSA: STOP-BANG, GP referral, home sleep study (most common now), CPAP if confirmed moderate-to-severe. For non-OSA sleep disorders: sleep medicine, neurology or specialist sleep psychology depending on the picture.
- **NeuroFX is not a sleep medicine service.** Our ADHD and autism clinicians can support the wider picture but the sleep-disorder assessment route is NHS sleep medicine or a specialist private sleep clinic.
- **Bring the right framing to the consultation.** "My ADHD treatment has been incomplete and I want to be assessed for sleep apnoea before further medication changes" lands more clearly than a general sleep complaint.

WHEN TO SPEAK TO A PROFESSIONAL

Speak to your GP with a completed STOP-BANG questionnaire if you have any combination of loud snoring (your partner is the witness), daytime sleepiness, morning headaches, witnessed breathing pauses, or chronic cognitive symptoms that have not improved with ADHD treatment. For restless legs, severe daytime sleepiness, or other significant sleep symptoms, GP referral to sleep medicine is the route. NeuroFX is not a sleep medicine service; our ADHD and autism clinicians can support the wider picture but the sleep-disorder assessment route is NHS sleep medicine or a specialist private sleep clinic.

SOURCES

Sedky 2014 Sleep Med Rev; Veatch 2017 Autism Res; Patil 2019 AASM; BTS; Chung 2008 STOP-BANG; Hvolby 2015; NICE CKS OSA

NEXT STEPS**Speak to NeuroFX**

Private ADHD and autism assessment for adults and children aged 6 and upwards.
CQC-registered. Bedford Consulting Rooms, 4 Goldington Road, Bedford MK40 3NF.

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