



## **Consensus statement on the management of Tonsil stones (Tonsilloliths) for ENT Scotland**

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### **Introduction:**

Tonsil stones represent the accumulation of debris and bacteria within the crypts of the palatine tonsils. In general, they cause minimal symptoms. However occasionally patients report bad breath (Halitosis) and discomfort in the tonsil area due to the presence of these accumulations. Tonsil stones are not typically associated with acute infection such as bacterial tonsillitis, although they can co-exist in patients with a history of recurrent tonsillitis.

Tonsillectomy (surgical removal of the tonsils) is a common ENT operation. The incidence of tonsillectomy has been reducing over the past 20 years following reviews of the literature and the development of national guidelines on the management of sore throat. The most recent SIGN guidelines highlight the role of tonsillectomy in patients with recurrent tonsillitis as well as in children with obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA). There is however a lack of evidence to support the use of tonsillectomy in the management of tonsil stones.

Tonsillectomy is a morbid procedure with patients experiencing significant post-operative pain, requiring time off normal activities and the significant risk of serious complications including post-operative infection and haemorrhage. The latter typically requires readmission to hospital via an Emergency department and may require a return to the operating theatre to control the bleeding. Although very rare, death has been reported following tonsillar haemorrhage.

### **Evidence:**

The medical literature currently supports the use of tonsillectomy for recurrent tonsillitis and obstructive sleep apnoea in children. However, no evidence exists for tonsillectomy in patients presenting with tonsil stones. The literature describes alternative conservative treatments including

gargling with salt water, expressing the tonsil stones manually and a trial of a dairy-free diet. None of these treatments is supported with level 1 evidence. Surgical procedures such as cryptolysis (“smoothing” the surface of the tonsil) using either laser or coblation have been popularised in North America and Europe.

There is no evidence that the presence of tonsil stones leads to long term health issues.

### **Consensus:**

Following discussion across the ENT surgical profession in NHS Scotland and considering the above evidence and risks, there is a consensus that the provision of surgical tonsillectomy for patients presenting with tonsil stones alone is not currently a good use of NHS resource. ENT Scotland in consultation with the office of the Chief Medical Officer in Scotland concludes therefore that this procedure should not be offered on the NHS in Scotland.

### **References:**

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