

THE CENTER FOR SPEECH EXCELLENCE

Tongue Thrust and Swallowing Disorders

Tongue Thrust refers to a swallowing pattern in which the tongue is placed in the front of the mouth to begin the swallow. Forward position of the tongue may also be seen at rest (mouth breathers). Normal swallowing patterns after infancy involve a coordinated smooth movement of the tongue toward the back of the mouth.

This consistent forward movement of the tongue may cause speech errors and misaligned teeth. Forward positioning of the tongue during rest has the most influence on misaligning the teeth due to duration of the pressure. The speech disorder most commonly associated with tongue thrust is a frontal lisp, in which the tongue is placed between the teeth for the sounds s and z, and sometimes for sh, ch, j, and soft g.

Development: Swallowing begins in the fetus with sucking, swallowing amniotic fluid and occasional thumb sucking. The newborn infant swallows differently than an adult for several reasons. The mouth is smaller, so the tongue fills it up and rests more toward the front. This position contributes to the front tongue and lip movements when sucking a nipple. Structures in the back of the mouth are much closer together than in adults, and the larynx is higher. As the infant develops, the jaw lowers, the mouth has more room, and the larynx enlarges.

Research shows that bite develops at approximately 7 months old and chewing at 10-12 months old. When solid foods are introduced, the tongue remains behind the incisors for biting and should remain there during chewing.

Causes of tongue thrust in children: Researchers have identified several possible reasons for tongue thrust:

- If there is a delay in developmental changes, forward carriage of the tongue may be seen for an extended period.
- Thumb sucking leads to frontal movement of the tongue and misaligned teeth, depending on its duration and intensity.
- Allergies and/or enlarged tonsils and adenoids prompt forward carriage of the tongue in order to clear the airway. Oftentimes a high palatal arch and mouth breathing accompany this type of disorder.
- Heredity

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Characteristics

People with tongue thrust may:

- Show tongue position at the front of the mouth, often between the teeth, when at rest, while speaking, and while chewing and swallowing. Messy eating may result due to food being pushed toward the front of the mouth.
- May or may not have accompanying speech errors. When there are speech errors, they usually involve s, z, sh, ch, j, or g.
- Have allergies.
- Engage in thumb sucking.
- Have misaligned teeth (overbite, openbite).

Assistance

We can offer the following assistance:

- Evaluation of articulation and swallowing skills with statement of severity and recommendations for treatment.
- A full report of the assessment and recommendations to be shared with physicians, dentists, orthodontists, schools, family members, or others.
- Therapy to resolve articulation errors and disordered swallowing patterns.
- Parents may observe therapy, consult with speech pathologists, and receive assistance in implementing carryover activities at home.

Adapted from Evaluation and Treatment of Swallowing Disorders, by Jerilyn Logemann and Tongue Thrust: A Diagnostic & Treatment Program, by Donald L. Rampp and Mary Pannbacker.

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