

# Tongue-Tie

Tongue tie (“ankyloglossia”) is a condition where a person has a short frenulum, or tie, that holds the tongue tightly to the floor of the mouth and reduces the mobility, flexibility and reach of the tongue.

There will be some cases where tongue tie release is of benefit, however, it should not be considered as the first option. Surgery should only be considered after further investigation of the impact of a tongue tie on FUNCTION i.e. does it affect feeding, chewing and speech.

The speech pathologist has a role in the evaluation of the functional impact of tongue tie on

1. successful infant feeding and
2. determining the impact of tongue tie in children and adults on successful chewing, swallowing and the ability of the tongue to adequately clear food residue from the lips, teeth and other parts of the mouth and
3. evaluating the impact of tongue tie in children and adults on clear and intelligible speech

## What is the frenum/frenulum?

The frenum/frenulum (both words have the same meaning) is present in all people from birth. It is a membrane that attaches the underside of the tongue to the floor of the mouth, and anchors part of the tongue.

## What is a tongue tie?

A tongue tie (also known as ankyloglossia), is a condition where a person has a short frenulum which is impacting on the tongue ability to move and function.

Tongue tie is only considered as a diagnosis when the frenulum restricts normal movement AND function needed for feeding or talking.

## What is the effect of tongue tie?

Babies with a tongue tie might have difficulty breast or bottle feeding. Children or adults might have difficulty eating, swallowing, clearing food residue from the lips or around their mouth.

Tongue tie is reported to have the most significant impact on breastfeeding, and is usually picked up in the first few months of life due to this.

## What impact does tongue tie have on speech?

Tongue ties rarely affect speech development and children and adults with tongue ties can often make all speech sounds and have normally developing speech.

Research evidence indicates tongue-tie surgery is rarely needed to help improve a child or adult’s speech and it does not support surgery as a way of preventing a child from having future speech problems.



## How is a tongue tie diagnosed?

A speech pathologist is one professional who can identify tongue-tie along with doctors, lactation consultants, dentists, paediatricians, ear nose and throat specialists and maxillo-facial surgeons.

In babies they will look at how well the tongue is able to function, including:

- feeding, and latching onto the bottle or breast.
- the strength of their tongue when feeding.
- position of the tongue when feeding and how efficient its movements are
- how the baby uses their tongue to cup and hold the breast, bottle or a finger.
- Level of pain with breastfeeding

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In children and adults, a speech pathologist will look at how the tongue is able to function in

- speech
- when eating and swallowing e.g. chewing or clearing of mouth

## When should a referral for surgery to release a tongue tie be considered?

The aim of tongue-tie treatment is to make sure your child's feeding, nutrition, growth, and development are not affected by their tongue-tie. Babies should thoroughly assessed for feeding, latching, posture and technique by a speech pathologist and/or lactation consultant prior to considering any type of surgery.

Follow up post-surgical or non-surgical intervention is essential to ensure the original presenting functional issue has been addressed. If this is not the case, then further assessment is required.

For older children and adult's traditional speech pathology interventions are recommended in the first instance before considering surgery. If a child or adult has speech issues, a speech pathologist may recommend a period of therapy before tongue-tie surgery is even considered.

There is no guarantee that tongue tie release will immediately make speech clearer or feeding/eating issues disappear. Ongoing intervention and support are essential post any treatment to ensure any residual issues are addressed.

## What happens in tongue tie surgery?

There are several different methods of surgical release, from the use of scissor or laser to release the frenulum to surgery to remove

it. This will be discussed with you by the appropriate professional if you are referred. They will discuss the potential benefits, risks and possible side effect prior to the surgery taking place.

## Which other health professionals are involved in the assessment and management of tongue tie?

A range of health professionals may be involved in identifying tongue tie and the assessment and management of tongue tie. These include: lactation consultants, speech pathologists, general medical practitioners, paediatricians, ear nose and throat specialists, community health nurses, orthodontists, dentists, dental hygienists, and dental therapists may have a role.

Pediatricians, ear nose and throat specialists, maxillofacial surgeons, and dentists may be involved in surgery for tongue tie, depending on the age of the patient, and the complexity of the surgery needed.

It is recommended parents discuss the reasons why their baby or child needs surgery with their doctor/health professional. If tongue tie surgery has been recommended, some questions you could ask include:

- What type of surgery are you doing?
- What will be the benefits of surgery?
- What will happen if you don't do the surgery?
- Are there any side effects to the surgery?
- Will an anesthetic be required?
- Will pain relief be required after surgery?
- What is the recovery period after surgery?
- Does this surgery have any complications?

How do I become a speech pathologist?

Speech pathology is an accredited undergraduate or entry level masters degree.

To find out more go to [speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/become](http://speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/become)

How do I find a speech pathologist in my area?

Go to [www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/find](http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/find)

For further information contact Speech Pathology Australia – the national peak body representing speech pathologists, the professionals who work with and advocate for people who have a communication and/or swallowing disability, and all Australian consumers of speech pathology services.

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