



Let's Talk



Tongue Thrust: Swallowing and Speech Problems

“My son Jimmy was a mouth breather. When he was sleeping, his mouth stayed open and he snored. His mouth was open even when he was not talking. Our family doctor recommended that his tonsils be taken out. After that, his breathing improved. His tongue was still between his teeth when he talked and swallowed, though. Our doctor suggested that Jimmy see a speech-language pathologist to help him speak and eat better.”

—Frieda

Have You Been Told That Your Child Has Tongue Thrust?

Some children push their tongue between their front teeth when swallowing, eating, talking, or while at rest. This is called tongue thrust.

It's normal for babies to hold their tongues forward when they swallow. This should stop by the time your child is 1½ or 2 years old.

There are some sounds that we make by putting our tongue near our front teeth, such as the sounds “la,” “ta,” and “da.” Otherwise, our tongue stays behind our teeth when we speak.

If your child has tongue thrust, you may see his tongue when he speaks or eats. He may have trouble speaking or swallowing. Tongue thrust can also push your child's teeth out of place. Your child's dentist may be the first person to tell you that the tongue thrust is causing a problem.

What Causes Tongue Thrust?

Tongue thrust can be caused by:

- Mouth breathing because of allergies or large tonsils
- Thumb and finger sucking that may change the shape of your child's jaw and teeth
- Tongue or lip weakness

Fast facts

- Children with tongue thrust push their tongue between their front teeth.
- Tongue thrust may cause swallowing and talking problems.
- Speech-language pathologists, or SLPs, can help.

Will My Child Have Speech Problems?

Some children with tongue thrust do not have any speech problems. Others may say some sounds the wrong way, such as the “s” in “sun,” the “z” in “zoo,” or the “sh” in “ship.” You may also hear this called a lisp.

If your child has speech or swallowing problems from tongue thrust, she should see a speech-language pathologist, or SLP.

How Will the SLP Help My Child?

Your SLP may:

- Look at your child’s mouth to see how her muscles are working and how her teeth look
- Check how your child says speech sounds

- Watch how your child swallows
- Help your child stop sucking her thumb, if that is a problem
- Work with your child on keeping her tongue in the right place when at rest, swallowing, and talking

The SLP may suggest that your child see a doctor to find out if he needs treatment for large tonsils, or allergies. If your child’s teeth are out of place because of the tongue thrust, the SLP may suggest that your child see a dentist.

After examining your child, the SLP may develop a treatment plan. Your child may not qualify for speech therapy in school if he has a tongue thrust but no other speech problems. If your child does have speech problems, the SLP may treat the tongue thrust while working on other speech sounds.

“An SLP worked with Jimmy to teach him how to keep his tongue in the right position. His speech is getting better and doesn’t sound as slushy as it used to. I’ve also noticed that his tongue isn’t sticking out when he eats anymore.”

—Frieda

Tongue thrust can cause swallowing and speech problems. SLPs can help.

To learn more about tongue thrust or to find an SLP near you who has been certified by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), visit www.asha.org or call 800-638-8255 or (TTY) 301-296-5650.

My SLP’s name is

Appointment

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and

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