

Tongue Thrust

What is tongue thrust?

Tongue thrust refers to excessive forward movement of the tongue during swallowing or speech. It also refers to a forward resting posture, where the tongue may sit over the teeth or lips. Beyond infancy, tongue thrust is a problematic habit that may impact upon health, appearance and communication.

More about swallowing

A tongue thrust swallowing pattern is normal for infants when breast or bottle feeding. However, upon transitioning to solids, infants should begin to develop a more mature swallowing pattern where the tongue tip is placed against the roof of the mouth, behind the front teeth. The bolus is then propelled backwards with a wave-like movement of the tongue. When a tongue thrust swallow is used, food and drink are actually propelled forwards. Sometimes the tongue can be seen popping out of the mouth, but for others, close observation will reveal flexing of the muscles around the mouth. In a normal swallow, the lips and surrounding muscles should be relaxed.

A tongue thrust swallow may be retained due to:

- Thumb or finger sucking
- Sucking clothing
- Mouthing objects
- Nail biting
- Large tonsils or adenoids
- Allergies & nasal congestion
- Tongue tie
- Early loss of teeth
- Oral dyspraxia



What are the specific effects?

It is estimated that we swallow 1200-2000 times per day. Each time an individual uses a tongue thrust swallow, the tongue pushes on the teeth with great force. Over time, this pushes teeth and the arches of the palate out of alignment. An 'open bite' may develop, or 'buck teeth' may also be observed. While these are important issues, tongue thrust is not simply a cosmetic concern.

Individuals who have a tongue thrust swallow also often have speech disorders. Most commonly, they present with an inter-dental lisp, where the tongue protrudes between the front teeth when producing "s" or "z" sounds. When speaking normally the tongue should make contact with the roof of the mouth for a number of other sounds ("t, d, l, n"). This contact is very important as it stimulates expansion of the palate. When a tongue thrust is present, the palate may remain narrow and teeth become crowded and crooked. As the palate also forms the base of the nose, a narrow palate is often also associated with difficulties breathing. An open mouth posture, mouth breathing, snoring and sleep apnoea are side effects of an untreated tongue thrust.

Mouth breathing may seem benign, however, there are many health complications associated with it. When breathing through the mouth, inhaled air is cold and unfiltered. This leads to more frequent sickness. Dry, cracked lips and a dry mouth are also common. Over time, this leads to sensitive teeth, swollen gums and increased likelihood of tooth decay and infections.

Finally, snoring and sleep apnoea are serious side effects of an untreated tongue thrust, affecting energy levels and attention. We all want to feel our best, but for children, a good night's sleep is vital for growth and learning!

How do we manage tongue thrust?

- Assessment: Review of oral structures, breathing, swallowing & speech
- Referral: If appropriate, consultation with other health care professionals may be recommended (Orthodontists, Paediatricians, Ear Nose & Throat Specialists)
- Education: Learning about proper tongue placement and the importance of treatment
- Awareness training
- Establishing a new swallow pattern
- Speech therapy

Home practise is an important aspect of therapy, throughout awareness training, swallowing and speech therapy.

If you would like to discuss your child or learn more about tongue thrust from one of our speech pathologists, please contact us.