

Tongue Tie (Ankyloglossia)

What is Tongue Tie?

Tongue tie (also known as Ankyloglossia) is a congenital condition where the tongue is tethered to the floor of the mouth. This tethering is by a membrane (frenulum) in the middle of the tongue. Tongue tie may be diagnosed in infants who are having trouble feeding, or in older children who are learning to speak.

There are varying degrees of tongue tie, and in the most severe case (very rare) the frenulum connects the tip of the tongue to the inner border of the mandible (jaw) behind the lower teeth. Other findings on examination include inability for the child to lift the tongue to the roof of the mouth, a "heart-shaped" appearance to the front of the tongue and difficulty with protrusion of the tongue.

What Problems Does Tongue Tie Cause?

In infants with tongue tie, the most common symptoms are **feeding problems**. Most often, there is difficulty with latching on during breast feeding. Other problems include poor sucking, ineffective milk transfer and fatigue within a few minutes of starting feeding. Infants fed with a bottle can also experience slow feeding, excess dribbling during feeding, or swallowing air. The health visitor will usually advise referral to paediatric surgery or ENT if she suspects the tongue tie is affecting breastfeeding.

In older children, tongue tie can occasionally cause problems with **speech and pronunciation**. *Usually however, ankyloglossia does not interfere with speech production.* The potential speech problem is an articulation error – related to the /L/ and /Th/ sounds. When ankyloglossia is noted in a child with an articulation disorder it is often just coincidental. Whether the lingual frenulum has an anterior attachment on the tongue tip or is unusually short, the tongue usually has enough mobility for elevation and protrusion for speech. A useful rule of thumb is to note if your child's tongue can protrude to the outer pink border of the lower lip – if it can then speech articulation will not be affected. I won't agree to perform the procedure unless a Speech and Language Therapist has seen your child and identified tongue tie as the cause of the articulation error. Remember that ankyloglossia can not cause speech and language delay, but may be associated with articulation errors of speech only.

How is Tongue Tie Treated?

Treatment of ankyloglossia is a relatively straightforward surgical procedure called a "frenulotomy" or "frenuloplasty". This procedure releases the frenulum to allow the tongue to move normally.

Frenulotomy is extremely effective in treating feeding problems associated with tongue tie in newborns. Mothers also typically experience immediate relief in the pain associated with breastfeeding after the procedure and are able to nurse the baby immediately after the procedure. Feeding problems due to tongue tie in bottle fed infants typically improve after the procedure. There is a minimal amount of bleeding during the procedure, which stops easily with a short period of pressure. There have been no serious complications described for frenulotomy or frenuloplasty.

Children are treated as day cases under short general anaesthetic.