



the TONGUE

A tiny muscle with much power

words by Dr. Maribel Santos-Cordero, *Dentistry for Children & Adolescents*

My grandmother used to say: “The tongue has the power of life”. Did you know that the tongue is not only vital for speech but also essential to keep us healthy? This unique muscle carries a lot of responsibilities. It is needed for for speaking, sucking, tasting, chewing, swallowing, drinking, kissing, shaping our jaws as we grow, maintaining good oral health and even breathing properly. So much work for such a tiny muscle! It shouldn’t come as a surprise to learn that,

when the tongue can’t move properly, many basic functions in your body get altered.

Your tongue is attached to the floor of the mouth by a small “band” of tissue called the “lingual frenum”. When this band is too tight, it can restrict the proper movement of your tongue. This is called Ankyloglossia, more commonly referred to as “tongue-tie”. Interestingly enough, tongue-ties are as unique as snowflakes! They may be thin, translucent, corded or even thick and fleshy. The classic tongue-tie presents itself as a very visible restriction at the tip of the

tongue. However, a tongue-tie can happen in the front, middle or back of the tongue. Some ties can go undetected, may restrict movement and affect feeding, speech, breathing and proper development.

Since ties are present from birth, a fair question would be: “How can this affect my baby”? Infants with tongue-ties may have difficulties with breastfeeding such as latching issues, reflux, colic and poor weight gain. But, what if there are no breastfeeding issues? For those babies with tongue-ties and no nursing issues, developmental compensations may appear later in the form of speech disorders, feeding problems, sleep issues and poor development of the mouth.

YOU NEED YOUR TONGUE TO SPEAK!

When the tongue cannot move properly, children often struggle to correct errors and make little to no progress even after years of speech therapy.

YOU NEED YOUR TONGUE TO EAT!

Feeding disorders like choking and gagging on food, packing food in the cheeks, avoiding certain foods and slow eating may all be connected to a restricted tongue.

YOU NEED YOUR TONGUE TO HAVE A HEALTHY MOUTH! Proper development of the roof of your mouth, or palate, depends on the tongue being able to rest against your palate. When this is not possible, a narrow upper arch



forms, your teeth get crowded and your bite may be off (cross-bite). You may also get frequent dental cavities and swollen gums from not being able to use your tongue to clear food in your mouth.

YOU NEED YOUR TONGUE TO BREATHE PROPERLY! New research studies suggest that development of sleep issues, ranging from restless sleep to sleep apnea, are often linked to tongue-ties.

Now, having a tongue-tie does not mean that a child will have problems in the future. The important thing is to focus on function, not on form. In recent years there has been an increased awareness and education to improve detection of tongue-ties. A properly trained physician will be able to evaluate the tongue-tie restriction to determine poor or limited function. It is important to note that tongue-ties do not stretch or disappear over time. If there is a problem, it needs to be addressed with proper treatment. A frenectomy—commonly known as a “tie-revision” or a “tie release”—is the treatment of choice. When a laser is used, this simple procedure can remove restrictive tongue-ties in a matter of seconds. It is safe and painless; offers minimal bleeding and a low risk of infection. Most patients will need to do before and after surgery exercises (think of it as tongue rehab) and continue with speech or feeding therapy in order to re-train the tongue muscle. Success often requires a team approach that may involve a Speech Pathologist, a Myofunctional Therapist, a Pediatrician and a Revision Provider. Results vary with every patient. It has been our experience that, with proper treatment and follow-up, most patients show marked improvement in the development of appropriate sleep, speech and feeding skills.

TONGUE TIES MAY CREATE:

FEEDING DISORDERS

- Nursing difficulties
- Food aversions
- Gagging , Choking & Vomiting with food
- Picky eater , Slow eater
- Oral sensitivity
- Strong gag reflex
- Food packing
- Swallowing issues
- Reflux

SPEECH DISORDERS

- Difficulty speaking fast
- Speech sound errors and compensations
- Mumbling
- Stuttering
- Frustration with communication
- Minimal progress with speech therapy

SLEEP DISORDERS

- Restless sleep
- Sleep apnea
- Mouth breathing
- Behavioral issues from sleep deprivation
- Dark circles under the eyes
- Dental problems
- High arch, Narrow palate
- Crowding
- Frequent dental cavities
- Cross-bites

If you suspect your child is suffering from symptoms of a tongue-tie, don't wait to get help! 

*Dr. Maribel Santos-Cordero is a board-certified & laser-certified pediatric dentist in Lakewood Ranch dedicated to the oral health of children, adolescents and children with special needs. She believes in helping children achieve their full potential by providing all the necessary tools to guide their growth and development. You can visit www.sarasotachildrendentistry.com to learn more about her practice or call **941-907-7762**.*

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Maribel Santos-Cordero, DMD
Board Certified Pediatric Dentist
7315 Merchant Ct.
Lakewood Ranch, FL 34240
941-907-7762
www.sarasotachildrendentistry.com
 [sarasotachildrendentistry](http://sarasotachildrendentistry.com)



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