

Maternity

Tongue-tie and feeding your baby

What is a tongue-tie?

A tongue-tie is when your baby's tongue movement is restricted by a piece of membrane. This membrane connects the tongue to the bottom of the mouth.

During the development of your baby in the womb, the membrane was used to guide the formation of the baby's mouth. At the end of pregnancy this membrane recedes into the back of the tongue before birth. Sometimes this doesn't happen for a number of reasons, such as if your baby was born early.

These pictures show variation in appearance:



Anterior tongue-tie



Posterior tongue-tie

Image sourced from: Messner, Anna H., Cummings Otolaryngology: Head and Neck Surgery, 207, 3068-3075.e2 (Licenced by Elsevier ClinicalKey)



Patient Information

How can a tongue-tie affect feeding?

A tongue-tie may not affect feeding at all. It is the function of the tongue that matters and not the appearance of a tongue-tie to observe. Some babies may have difficulty feeding.

When a tongue-tie is observed and is considered to be causing feeding difficulties your baby may be referred to a tongue-tie specialist practitioner.

Tongue-tie can affect both breast and bottle feeding. Midwives and maternity support workers are here to help you. Most tongue-tie symptoms will resolve with feeding support.

Effects on breastfeeding

If your baby is breastfeeding, they may:

- Have difficulty attaching to the breast or staying attached for a full feed
- Feed constantly, have a short break and feed again
- Be unsettled and not appear satisfied after breastfeeds
- Not gain weight appropriately
- Make clicking sounds as they feed
- Suffer with colic, wind, hiccoughs
- Have reflux (vomiting after feeds)

If the tongue-tie is affecting your breastfeeding, you may notice:

- Sore nipples
- Low milk supply
- Lumps in your breasts (blocked ducts)
- Misshapen nipples (after feeding)

Some mothers have some or all symptoms above and this may be due to the way your baby is feeding, and not just because your baby has a tongue-tie. Ask your midwife to assist you with positioning and attachment.

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Effects on bottle feeding

If your baby is bottle feeding, they may:

- Dribble a lot of milk when feeding
- Make clicking sounds when feeding
- Tire during feeding so only drinks small amounts
- Cough and choke when feeding
- Suffer from wind, hiccoughs and reflux

Please note there may be other reasons for feeding problems, it is important your feeding is observed by a practitioner who is skilled in infant feeding support.

Where are the treatment options?

Once your baby has been identified as having a tongue-tie affecting feeding you will need to discuss which course of action you would like to take.

To help make your decision you may be referred to a tongue-tie specialist practitioner. They will discuss and assess:

- Detailed feeding and medical history
- Family history of tongue-tie
- Your baby's tongue movement and tongue-tie symptoms
- Treatment options

You have two options:

- Do nothing
- Have a tongue-tie division

Do nothing

If you choose to do nothing and wait and see, the membrane may tear by itself during childhood or into adulthood. As the tongue grows, the movement may improve.

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Before 8 weeks if you would like a further assessment, please contact a health professional who can make a referral to the tongue tie assessment clinic. After 8 weeks you will need to seek a referral from your GP to ENT specialists.

Tongue-tie division

Tongue-tie division is a simple, sterile procedure which takes a few seconds - no anaesthetic is required. During the procedure, the baby is wrapped in a blanket or towel to stop them wriggling. As soon as the tongue-tie has been divided, the floor of the baby's mouth is pressed with gauze. Most babies stop crying as soon as they begin to feed.

Useful resources

- NICE Guideline available at www.nice.org.uk/IPG149publicinfo
- www.tongue-tie.org.uk
- la leche league -<http://www.laleche.org.uk/>
- Breastfeeding network <http://www.breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk/>
- Association of breast feeding mothers <http://abm.me.uk/frenulotomy-tongue-tie-release/>
- Prevalence, diagnosis and treatment of ankyloglossia <http://www.cfp.ca/content/53/6/1027.full.pdf+html>
- <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/tongue-tie/Pages/Introduction.aspx>
- <https://sarahoakleylactation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Parents-Guide-to-Tongue-tie.pdf>

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Patient Information

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Document History

Department:	Maternity
Contact:	27369
Updated:	January 2023
Review:	January 2025
Version:	2
Reference:	HIC/LFT/2510/20