

Is your tongue a problem?

As a dentist I feel that we have long neglected discussing with our patients the important role that the tongue plays in almost every aspect of their health. This includes facial development, digestion, speech and sleep. In recent years I have become very passionate about educating parents on the effect of the orofacial (mouth and face) connection, so that they can take proactive steps to address these issues before they affect their child's development. What people do not

realize is that when the tongue is in the proper position during its many daily functions, the result will be a healthier, more stable and more attractive individual. Unfortunately, when the tongue is unable to perform properly due to poor position, a compromised airway, or improper swallow, there are many negative consequences, especially in developing children.

Swallowing

Correct swallowing depends on a proper re-

lationship between the muscles of the face, tongue and throat. However, it is imperative that the tongue is in the proper position when swallowing, especially in early jaw development or a tongue thrust (also called a reverse swallow) habit can occur. This is when the tongue protrudes through the front teeth during swallowing, speech, or even at rest. According to recent literature, 67-95 percent of children 5 to 8 years old exhibit a tongue thrust that can contribute to an orthodontic or speech problem. This can cause your child to have a very difficult orthodontic situation or lead to complete relapse after braces. If you have noticed this type of behavior with your child, evaluation by their dentist or orthodontist is highly recommended.

Stabilizing your jaws and bite

If optimal jaw development is to occur, the tongue needs to be in the proper position even when it is at rest. Ideally, the tongue, teeth and cheeks are in a "neutral" position. There should be no abnormal forces within the mouth. This will allow proper alignment of the teeth, jaws and facial development. Your tongue can actually act like a natural palatal expander.

Test yourself

When you are at rest, the tip of your tongue should be on the roof of your mouth just in back of your front teeth. The lips should be closed, teeth are apart, and the face should be relaxed. If any of this is not in equilibrium, problems can occur.

The tongue, gram for gram, is the strongest muscle in the body. The tongue is such a powerful muscle that this imbalance can cause deformation of the jaws, crowding of teeth, and even relapse following orthodontics. This can then lead to many serious conditions such as a TMJ disorder (headaches, jaw and neck pain, ringing in the ears) or even snoring and sleep apnea. Many times, this imbalance is the result of an undiagnosed airway issue.

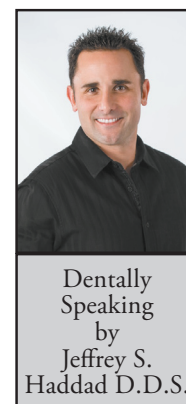
Airway

Did you know that the tongue actually makes up the front wall of your airway? Our body will do whatever it takes to breathe and get oxygen to live. We will breathe through our mouths if we cannot breathe through our nose, we will change the posture of our head and neck to open our airway, and we will even change the posture of our tongue to breathe better. Mouth breathing can also lead to retraction of the lower jaw, which means the lower jaw sits back from its natural resting position. This can predispose children to snoring and sleep apnea.

A retracted lower jaw may also create problems for the temporomandibular joint, which joins the upper and lower jaws near the ear. This can lead to impingement of the Eustachian tubes causing hearing problems. In addition, if a person has an airway issue such as enlarged tonsils and adenoids, this can force the tongue into a pathologic position and all the previously mentioned issues can occur.

Paying attention to children's swallowing patterns and tongue position is so important in their growth and dental health. Intervening with these children as early as possible is the best way to facilitate proper development of their jaws resulting in optimum health and the most attractive face possible. Having your child evaluated is the best way to address this issue before it causes future problems.

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