

Dribbling

How to Help

Speech & Language Therapy

Why does my child dribble?

Dribbling (also called drooling) is when uncontrolled saliva comes out of the front of the mouth. This is normal in young infants, but has usually stopped during the daytime by the time a child is 4 years old (older children may still dribble when sleeping).



If your child continues to dribble beyond 4 years of age this might be because your child:

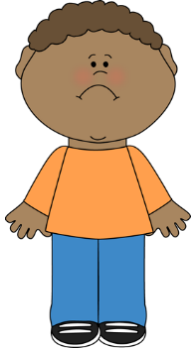
- **Is not able to keep saliva within their mouth.** This might be because they have poor head control, a constant open mouth, poor lip or tongue control, reduced sensation in and around the mouth, or a blocked nose.
- **Has problems swallowing,** which causes saliva to build up in the front of the mouth. The swallow may be inefficient or infrequent.
- **Produces too much saliva.** This might be caused by certain medicines, eating certain foods, reflux (when food or fluid comes back up the food pipe into the throat or mouth), dental issues or mouth or throat infections.

If your child has been diagnosed with a developmental disorder or disability this might mean that they are more likely to dribble.

Should I be worried?

If your child's dribbling is having a negative impact (this could be physical, psychological or both) you might want to seek support to help manage this.

Negative impacts include:



- Skin irritation and breakdown, caused by a wet face and frequent wiping.
- Frequent need to change clothing.
- Damage to books, toys and equipment.
- Social embarrassment which might lead to low self-esteem and isolation.

TIPS

- ✓ Discourage thumb sucking and stop dummy use. This will help to reduce saliva production and encourage lip closure.
- ✓ Dab rather than wipe your child's mouth and chin. Wiping across the mouth and chin can cause more saliva to be produced. Dab firmly using a tight wad of absorbent material.
- ✓ If your child is able to dab their own mouth, use a sports towelling wristband. This might be more socially acceptable than handkerchiefs and bibs and will help to keep clothes dry.



- ✓ Use age-appropriate neckerchiefs/bandanas which can be changed easily, to protect clothes.
- ✓ If your child puts their fingers and objects into their mouth excessively, try to reduce this by distracting them with a different activity. This will help to reduce saliva production and encourage lip closure.

- ✓ Avoid sweet and acidic foods and fizzy drinks as this increase saliva production.
- ✓ Play blowing games (e.g., blowing bubbles) and use drinking straws to help develop lip and cheek motor skills.



- ✓ Talk about being wet and dry to help your child to become more aware when their face is wet/dry.
- ✓ Think About Positioning. Good posture (which helps your child to control their body and head) can help to improve saliva control and reduce dribbling. Does your child's seating encourage and enable good posture?



Will oral-motor exercises help?

Whilst exercises *might* be helpful to improve lip and jaw closure, increase tongue control and improve tone and sensation, the evidence base for oral-motor exercises helping to reduce dribbling, is currently limited.

For oral-motor exercises to be effective long term, the following is required:

- Your child needs to be able to focus his/her attention and follow instructions. (These exercises will not be appropriate for a child with significant learning needs).
- Your child needs to be aware of their dribbling, and highly motivated for this to change.
- It can take a long time for improvement to be seen. Exercises need to become part of the daily routine.

What Next?

Please try the tips listed within this leaflet.



Following this, if you think you need further help/support or you think oral-motor exercises might help your child, please contact a member of the Speech and Language Therapy team on:- 01633 431633 to discuss this further.

References:

Guys and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust (2019) *Managing your child's drooling* [online] [drooling-saliva-management.pdf](#)

Walshe et al (2012) Interventions for drooling in children with cerebral palsy (review) *Cochrane Database of systematic reviews* [online] [Walshe et al-2012-Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews.pdf](#)

"This information leaflet is also available in Welsh"
"Mae'r daflen wybodaeth hon hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg"