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Oral Motor Developmental Milestones

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What is oral motor development?

Oral motor development refers to the use and function of the lips, tongue, jaw, teeth, and the hard and soft palates. The movement and coordination of these structures is very important in speech production, safe swallowing, and consuming various food textures. Normal oral motor development begins prior to birth and continues beyond age three. By age four, most children safely consume solids and liquids without choking.



The milestones below are typically observable through these particular ages. Consult your doctor or pediatrician before introducing new foods to your baby. He/She will guide you in selecting appropriate foods and feeding utensils. Use the following list of developmental milestones to monitor your child's progress toward oral motor and swallowing development.

Before birth, the baby:



- Begins to develop the sucking and suckling reflexes around 36 weeks.

At birth to three months, the baby:



- Demonstrates many reflexes to protect his/her airway.
- Responds to stimulation in and around the mouth.
- Turns his/her head toward the nipple when the caregiver strokes the cheeks. This signals that the baby is ready to eat.
- Consumes breast milk or formula using a nipple.
- Coordinates his/her breath with two to three sucks of liquid before swallowing and breathing.

At three to six months, the baby:



- Brings both hands up to clasp the bottle but needs assistance holding it.
- Consumes rice cereal or pureed fruit and pureed vegetable baby foods.
- Eats from a small infant/toddler spoon during feeding.

At six to nine months, the baby:



- Holds the bottle independently.
- Cleans the spoon with his/her upper lip.
- Eats pureed meats and a variety of pureed baby foods.

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At nine to twelve months, the baby:



- Demonstrates lip closure while swallowing liquids and soft solids.
- Begins to self-feed by using his/her fingers to grab small foods. The baby may attempt to eat small, soft dissolvable solids (i.e., soft crackers and small cereals like Cheerios™).
- Begins to experiment drinking liquids from a sippy cup.
- Begins to consume mashed table foods.
- Drinks out of a sippy cup and attempts to hold the handle independently.
- Begins to drink through a straw.

At twenty-four to thirty-six months, the toddler:



- Consumes a variety of liquids and solids through straws and open mouth cups.
- Uses a spoon to scoop soft foods while feeding him/herself.
- Independently moves toward fine tuning all feeding skills.

At thirty-six months to five years, the child:



- Progresses toward chewing and swallowing advanced textures (meats, fried foods, whole fruits, etc.) with close supervision by a caregiver.
- Begins (with close supervision) to use a fork to stab food.
- Drinks from an open mouth cup with no assistance.

It is very important to consult your doctor or pediatrician if you feel that your child is not meeting these milestones at an age-appropriate level. Your doctor or pediatrician may refer you to a Speech-Language Pathologist or an Occupational Therapist who will evaluate and develop a plan to strengthen your child's oral motor skills.

At twelve to eighteen months, the toddler:



- Coordinates sucking, swallowing, and breathing patterns for longer sequences.
- Begins to eat finely chopped table foods.
- Bites through crunchy foods such as cookies and crackers.
- Moves the food in his/her mouth from side to side as he/she chews.

At eighteen to twenty-four months, the toddler:



- Feeds him/herself using a spoon but may still need assistance.



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