Tongue Thickness and Its Clinical Significance

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Keywords: tongue thickness, oral function, elderly, assessment

Abstract: Background: The tongue occupies most of the space in the oral cavity and it plays an important role in oral functions such as mastication, swallowing and articulation. The tongue continues to move from the time of intake to swallowing, particularly during masticating. A method for evaluating tongue thickness at rest by ultrasonography has been proposed; however, the association between tongue thickness and various oral functions remains unclear.

Objective: The purpose of this study was to investigate the relation between tongue thickness and oral functions, and to clarify the clinical significance of tongue thickness measurements in oral function maintenance.

Materials and Methods: Elderly outpatients were serially screened for enrollment and a total of 106 subjects (men, 54; women, 52; mean age, 75.2 ± 6.5 years) were selected. Age, body mass index, and functional teeth number including implant and pontic of fixed partial denture number were recorded as the basic attributes. Tongue thickness, tongue pressure, tongue thrust pressure and tongue motor function were measured as tongue assessments. Cheek pressure, oral moisture and occlusal force were measured as other oral functions.

Results: Subjects with thick tongue tended to have higher BMI, stronger muscle strengths and lower diadochokinesis. Diadochokinesis of /ka/, cheek pressure and functional teeth number were extracted as the independent factors affecting tongue thickness.

Conclusion: Tongue thickness does not necessarily reflect oral functions in healthy elderly people except for a negative association between tongue thickness and oral diadochokinesis of /ka/. Multiple assessments of tongue would be required to evaluate oral function, and the assessment of tongue thickness might have a different clinical meaning.

Introduction

The tongue occupies most of the space in the oral cavity and it plays an important role in oral functions such as mastication, swallowing and articulation. The tongue continues to move from the time of intake to swallowing, particularly during masticating.

Assessments of tongue include functional and morphological assessments. The functional ones are tongue movement, tongue pressure, tongue motor function and tongue-related electromyograms (EMGs). Tongue movement has been measured using videofluoroscopic examination of swallowing (VF) and ultrasonic diagnostic equipment. Tongue pressure has been measured using a strain gage-type pressure sensor, pressure sheet sensor and the balloon-
type tongue pressure sensor. Tongue motor function has been measured the maximum repetition number during the monosyllabic utterance on tongue (oral diadochokinesis). An assessment of tongue morphology using ultrasonography, that is tongue thickness, has been reported by Tamura et al. T, who reported that the tongue thickness at rest was significantly related to nutritional condition, body mass index (BMI) and period of care needed. However, the relationship between tongue thickness and various oral functions is not clear.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between tongue thickness and oral functions, which can be provided easily at chair side; and to clarify the clinical significance of tongue thickness measurements in the management of oral function.

Materials and methods

Subjects

We enrolled 106 elderly outpatients with regular maintenance from January 2017 to August 2017 in the dental division of Tokushima University Hospital. The exclusion criteria of the participants were those with a history of an ingesting/swallowing disorder and with maxillofacial defect.

This study was approved by the clinical research institutional review board of the Ethics Committee of the Tokushima University Hospital (Approval No. 2225). Consent was obtained with a document from all participants after providing sufficient explanations.

Basic attribute

Age, height and weight were gathered through interviews and then BMI was calculated. Functional teeth number including implant and pontic of fixed partial denture number was counted during the oral examination.

Tongue assessment

1) Tongue thickness

Tongue thickness was defined as the distance from the mylohyoid muscle surface to the tongue dorsum surface when an ultrasound probe (frequency, 4.0–8.0 MHz; contact face size, 9 × 25 mm) of ultrasonography (Vscan with Dual Probe, GE, Tokyo, Japan) was positioned to the middle of bilateral second mandibular premolars perpendicular to the Frankfurt plane (Figure 1). Measurements were performed in the image when the tongue was in a stable position after swallowing saliva. Measurements were repeated three times, and the mean value was used as a representative value.

2) Tongue pressure and tongue thrust pressure

The maximum tongue pressure and tongue thrust pressure were measured using a commercially-available tongue pressure meter (JMS tongue pressure measurement device, JMS, Hiroshima, Japan). As for the maximum tongue pressure, a balloon-type tongue pressure probe was placed between the tongue and palate, and the participants were asked to press it as much as possible for 7 seconds. As for tongue thrust pressure, the probe was held lightly against the upper and lower right first premolars and the participants were asked to close their lips and press the balloon with the tongue apex as much as possible for 7 seconds. Measurements were repeated three times and the mean value was used as a representative value.

3) Tongue motor function

Oral diadochokinesis was measured as an indicator of tongue motor function. Participants were asked to utter repeatedly either of the syllables, /ka/ or /ta/, as quickly as possible for 5 seconds. The utterance frequency (number per second) of /ka/ or /ta/ was measured using an automatic counter (Kenkokun Handy, Takei Scientific Instruments Co., Nigata, Japan) as assessments of tongue apex and dorsum, respectively. Measurements were taken three times for each subject and the maximum value was recorded as a representative value.

Cheek pressure

Cheek pressure was measured using the tongue pressure meter based on a previous study. Participants were asked to bite at a habitual occlusal position and the balloon-type probe was held between the right buccal mucosa and the buccal surface of the upper and lower first molars. Participants were asked to press it by the buccal mucosa as much as possible for 7 seconds. Measurements were repeated three times and the mean value was used as a representative value.

Oral moisture

Oral moisture was measured using an oral moisture checker (Mucus, Life Co., Saitama, Japan). Participants were asked to stick out their tongue and the sensor head was positioned vertically against the portion of the tongue dorsum to approximately 10 mm apart from the tongue apex with contact pressure of approximately 200 gf during 2 seconds. Measurements were repeated three times and the median was recorded as the representative value.

Occlusal force

A pressure-indicating film (Dental Prescale 50H, GC, Tokyo, Japan) and Occluzer 709 (GC, Tokyo, Japan) were used to measure the total sum of the occlusal force in maximum clenching at the intercuspal position for 3 seconds. Measurements were performed three times and the maximum value was used as representative values.
Statistical analysis

Before regression analysis, the participants were divided into two groups: “thin group (0)” and “thick group (1)” according to tongue thickness as shown in Table 1.

Mann-Whitney U test was used to analyze the differences between the thin and thick groups. Next, a univariate logistic regression analysis using the forced entry method with the tongue thickness as the dependent variables was performed to clarify the association with each factor. A multivariate logistic regression analysis was also performed to assess the interactions between variables. The backward elimination method with the likelihood ratio test was used to select the variables.

Before conducting these tests, Shapiro-Wilk test was used to confirm whether the data had a normal distribution. The SPSS 24.0 for MAC (IBM Co., Tokyo, Japan) was used for all statistical analysis and the level of statistical significance was set at a p value of 0.05.

Results

Characteristics of participants

The baseline characteristics of the 106 elderly participants showing the means and standard deviations were as follows: age 75.2 ± 6.5 years, BMI 2.5 ± 3.3 kg/m², functional teeth number 13.4 ± 9.5, tongue thickness 49.7 ± 6.4 mm, tongue pressure 27.7 ± 8.4 kPa, tongue thrust pressure 24.7 ± 8.1 kPa, oral diadochokinesis of /ta/ 6.2 ± 1.0 times, oral diadochokinesis of /ka/ 5.7 ± 1.1 times, cheek pressure 6.3 ± 4.1 kPa, occlusal force 280.2 ± 210.9 N, and oral moisture

Table 1  Categorization of tongue thickness for the regression analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tongue thickness (mm)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thin group (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thick group (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

28.3 ± 2.5.

Because Shapiro-Wilk test showed that tongue thickness did not conform to normal distribution, Mann-Whitney U test was performed to compare the groups of tongue thickness in the measurement factors. Significant differences were found between the diadochokinesis of /ka/ (hereinafter called /ka/) and cheek pressure (Table 2). Subjects with thick tongue tended to have higher BMI, stronger muscle strengths and lower diadochokinesis.

Comparison of tongue thickness and various factors

Tables 3 and 4 show the results for two types of logistic regression analysis.

A univariate logistic regression analysis revealed that BMI, /ka/ and cheek pressure were extracted as significant factors affecting tongue thickness. A multivariate logistic regression analysis revealed that /ka/, cheek pressure and functional teeth number were extracted as significant independent factors.
### Table 2  Differences in measurement factors between the thin and thick groups of tongue thickness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Thin group (n=53)</th>
<th>Thick group (n=53)</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Median (interquartile range)</td>
<td>Median (interquartile range)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>75.00 (69.00-81.00)</td>
<td>75.00 (69.00-80.00)</td>
<td>0.955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI, kg/m²</td>
<td>22.06 (20.23-23.64)</td>
<td>23.44 (20.62-25.03)</td>
<td>0.061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tongue pressure, kPa</td>
<td>27.90 (21.67-33.02)</td>
<td>29.07 (24.20-33.65)</td>
<td>0.410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tongue thrust pressure, kPa</td>
<td>25.07 (17.17-29.75)</td>
<td>26.00 (20.93-31.65)</td>
<td>0.221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ta/, times</td>
<td>6.40 (5.60-7.00)</td>
<td>6.20 (5.40-6.60)</td>
<td>0.101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ka/, times</td>
<td>6.00 (5.40-6.50)</td>
<td>5.60 (2.80-6.20)</td>
<td>0.021*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheek pressure, kPa</td>
<td>15.73 (13.22-18.02)</td>
<td>17.03 (14.52-21.08)</td>
<td>0.032*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occlusal force, N</td>
<td>203.10 (122.50-355.15)</td>
<td>278.70 (166.25-432.65)</td>
<td>0.083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral moisture</td>
<td>29.00 (27.80-29.80)</td>
<td>28.40 (27.15-29.35)</td>
<td>0.146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional teeth number</td>
<td>9.00 (2.50-20.50)</td>
<td>15.00 (8.00-21.50)</td>
<td>0.114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significance (p < 0.05)

### Table 3  Association of tongue thickness with measurement factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Odds ratio</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lower limit</td>
<td>Upper limit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>0.943-1.061</td>
<td>0.988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI, kg/m²</td>
<td>1.138</td>
<td>1.005-1.289</td>
<td>0.042*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tongue pressure, kPa</td>
<td>1.020</td>
<td>0.974-1.068</td>
<td>0.410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tongue thrust pressure, kPa</td>
<td>1.032</td>
<td>0.983-1.083</td>
<td>0.203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ta/, times</td>
<td>0.673</td>
<td>0.444-1.020</td>
<td>0.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ka/, times</td>
<td>0.613</td>
<td>0.413-0.908</td>
<td>0.015*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheek pressure, kPa</td>
<td>1.104</td>
<td>1.000-1.220</td>
<td>0.050*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occlusal force, N</td>
<td>1.001</td>
<td>0.999-1.003</td>
<td>0.203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral moisture</td>
<td>0.934</td>
<td>0.798-1.092</td>
<td>0.391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional teeth number</td>
<td>1.035</td>
<td>0.993-1.079</td>
<td>0.101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significance (p < 0.05)
affecting tongue thickness.

**Discussion**

In the elderly, eating and conversation are a great pleasure and worth living for. Maintenance and improvement of oral functions such as mastication, swallowing and articulation in the old state have been reported to have a significant effect on improvement of the quality of life. The tongue plays a primary role in mastication, swallowing and conversation; and the decline of tongue function causes various problems such as difficulty of chewing, articulation and swallowing, and pulmonary aspiration. It is important to detect it at an earlier state and to take appropriate measures including rehabilitation and exercise before it becomes a serious problem. Although this study focused on the tongue, aspects of tongue movement are complicated. It is difficult to perform quantitative assessments based on direct observation and therefore, various indirect assessment methods have been developed.

Both functional and morphological assessments of the tongue are available. Functional assessments include the observations of tongue movements using VF and ultrasonic diagnostic equipment; tongue exercise ability using articulatory behavior such as oral diadochokinesis; tongue muscle strength such as maximum tongue pressure; tongue-related EMGs; tongue-palate contact pattern; and tongue contact pressure. Morphological assessments include the assessment of the tongue shape of the sagittal plane using a cephalogram, examination of the structure and three-dimensional shape of tongue using magnetic resonance imaging, and observations of the sagittal and coronal planes using VF and ultrasonic testing.

Table 4 Extracted factors affecting tongue thickness in the multivariate logistical regression analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Odds ratio</th>
<th>95% CI Lower limit</th>
<th>95% CI Upper limit</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/ka/ times</td>
<td>0.481</td>
<td>0.306</td>
<td>0.757</td>
<td>0.002*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheek pressure, kPa</td>
<td>1.145</td>
<td>1.026</td>
<td>1.278</td>
<td>0.016*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional teeth number</td>
<td>1.056</td>
<td>1.008</td>
<td>1.106</td>
<td>0.022*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significance (p < 0.05)

considering that tongue thickness was affected by the mid-arm muscle area and age. Moreover, Okayama et al. reported that tongue thickness of the elderly with care needs was associated to BMI and the period of care needed, and tongue thickness would help assess nutritional condition and oral functions. Furthermore, some reports have suggested that tongue thickness of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) patients was associated to BMI and maximum tongue pressure, and that tongue thickness could help to evaluate swallowing function of ALS patients.

In this study, we investigated the relationship between tongue thickness with oral functions in 106 elderly participants, who were 65 years old, and examined the significance of tongue thickness in the assessment of oral functions. Statistical analysis revealed a bias in the data distribution of tongue thickness, and the explanatory variable which was executed as a categorical variable divided into two groups: the thin and thick groups according to the median value.

Previous reports have suggested that a thick tongue showed high tongue pressure, and might be related to nutritional benefit. In this study, the values of /ka/ and cheek pressure were significantly different in the tongue thickness groups. Moreover, BMI, /ka/ and cheek pressure were extracted as the interactive valuables in the univariate logistic regression analysis; and /ka/, cheek pressure and functional teeth number were extracted in the multivariate logistic regression analysis. The thicker the tongue was, the more both BMI and tongue pressure tended to be high, although the differences were not significant.

In this study, tongue thickness tended to be greater as the value of oral muscle strength was higher, but no significant difference was observed except for cheek pressure. Although both cheek pressure and functional teeth number were
determined to be significant factors, their respective odds ratios were found to be 1.145 and 1.056, respectively, therefore they had only a weak association with tongue thickness. In contrast to previous studies of elderly people with care needs and of ALS patients\cite{18,21,22}, the subjects in this study were mostly healthy elderly receiving outpatient dental care for maintenance who had relatively high tongue functions. Most subjects were also believed to have adequate nutrition intake. Therefore, the results in this study would be different from previous studies.

It is reported that fiber atrophy and fattening of the extrinsic and intrinsic tongue muscles were commonly found in healthy elderly of 65 years older\cite{25}, and the positions of the larynx and hyoid bone after 60 years old were lower than those of young people\cite{26}. Such age-related changes might cause a low tongue position in healthy elderly. Oral diadochokinesis of /ka/ is used to assess the tongue motor function by raising tongue dorsum to the soft palate\cite{25,26}. In case of the low tongue position, it is speculated that the movement distance of tongue for the utterance of /ka/ becomes long. The relationship between the tongue thickness and low tongue position is not clear, but a low tongue position could be a factor in a lower frequency of /ka/. Moreover, when tongue thickness increases, tongue volume and mass increase and then the movement speed will decrease. Therefore, a greater tongue thickness was associated with a lower frequency of /ka/.

In this study, we assessed tongue function by using tongue thickness. However, tongue function is so influenced by tongue position, volume and mass. The present study suggested that tongue thickness did not necessarily reflect the movement function of the tongue or other oral functions. Therefore, tongue function should not be assessed solely by tongue thickness but to be done by using multiple examinations.

The tongue is mainly muscle tissue. Every muscle of the whole body during everyday activities usually works not with maximum power, but with plenty of power. It is known as reserved capacity, which is important for the maintenance of bodily functions for health and longevity, but that of elderly people is lower than that of younger people\cite{27,28}. It is reported that the elderly has a high risk for dysphagia because the reserve capacity of swallowing also declines with aging\cite{29}. It may be therefore possible that the reserve capacity declined even if the subjects had no problem on mastication and swallowing in the present study. The function of tongue dorsum which is assessed by the oral diadochokinesis of /ka/, is mainly to retain the bolus in the oral cavity and to push it into the pharynx at the time of mastication to swallowing. The decline might result in the laryngeal penetration of the bolus during swallowing and decline of swallowing pressure which finally causes pulmonary aspiration. Considering the report that tongue thickness decreases in elderly people with care needs\cite{18}, the continuous measurements of tongue thickness might have a different clinical significance as assessments of oral functions of the elderly.

It is possible to identify associated factors, but very difficult to determine the cause and effect association, while this study is based on a cross-sectional design. Therefore, future longitudinal and intervention studies are necessary to clarify those associations.

**Conclusion**

This study showed that tongue thickness does not necessarily reflect oral functions in healthy elderly people except for a negative association between tongue thickness and oral diadochokinesis of /ka/. It is speculated that multiple assessments of tongue would be required to evaluate oral function and the assessment of tongue thickness might have a different clinical meaning.

**Acknowledgement**

We gratefully acknowledge the work of past and present members of our laboratory. The authors also thank Dr. Omar Marianito Maningo Rodis (Tokushima University) for proofreading this manuscript. Special thanks also go to the hospital staffs that provided their help and sincere encouragement.

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