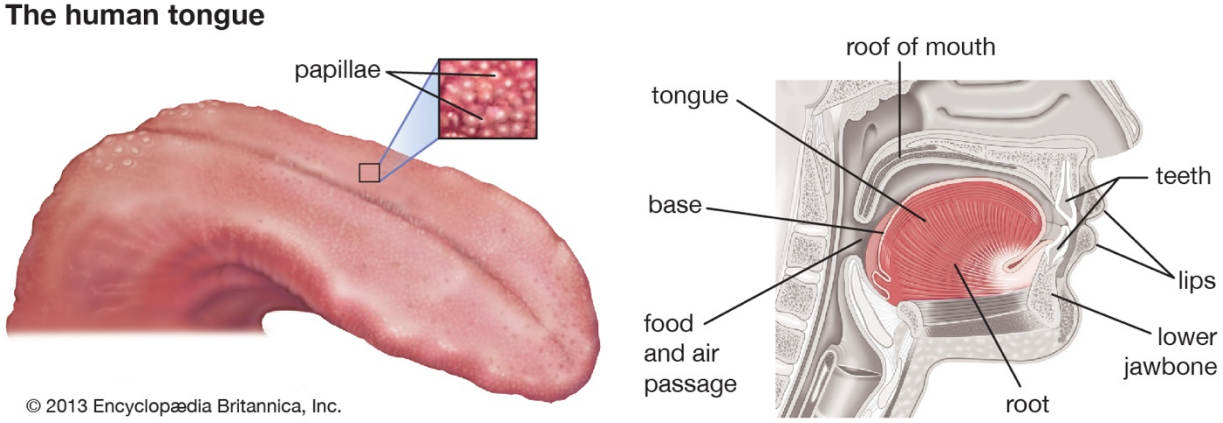
Tongue

Introduction



The tongue is an organ, or body part, in the mouth. It is made up of a group of muscles. Most vertebrates, or animals with a backbone, have a tongue.

The tongue is firmly attached to the bottom of the mouth. This attachment keeps the tongue from being swallowed. The underside of a mammal's tongue is smooth. The top of the tongue is rough and bumpy. These bumps are called papillae. The papillae contain taste buds. They also produce some of the fluid in saliva, a sticky liquid that keeps the mouth moist.

Eating and Tasting

In many animals the tongue helps in chewing and swallowing food. Papillae help to grip and hold food. The front muscles of the tongue move food around and over the teeth during chewing. The back muscles of the tongue help in swallowing. They push chewed food to the back of the mouth and down the throat.

The tongue is also responsible for the sense of taste. The taste buds contain special cells that send information about foods to the brain. These special cells each respond to a particular kind of taste. Humans can sense five basic tastes: salty, sweet, sour (acid), bitter, and umami. Umami represents the taste of certain chemicals called amino acids. People are born with about 10,000 taste buds. As people age, the number may drop to 5,000. This drop may explain why some foods, especially bitter ones, taste stronger to young people.

Other Uses

Tongues have many other uses. The human tongue plays an important part in speaking. It forms and shapes the sounds that make up language. Dogs and cats use their tongues to clean themselves. Frogs use their tongues to catch insects and other small animals for food. Snakes and other reptiles flick out their tongues to collect scents in the air.

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