

Palate (Hard and Soft Palate)

Encyclopedia Article

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The palate is essentially the roof of the mouth. The front portion of the palate is constructed of bone (specifically two bones called the maxilla and the palatine) covered with a mucous membrane. Together these form the hard palate. The hard palate can be felt by running the tongue over the roof of the mouth. Further back in the mouth, behind the hard palate, lies the soft palate. The soft palate is made up of muscular **tissue** that is covered by **epithelial tissue**. A projection of tissue known as the uvula hangs down from the middle of the soft palate over the root of the tongue. It is thought that the uvula functions to keep food from straying down the **breathing** passage during **swallowing**. In singers, the uvula has been claimed to function in the generation of the vibrato, or wavy up-and-down sound.

The hard and soft palate separates the oral cavity from the nasal cavity. In other animals the roof of the mouth is actually the base of the **skull**.

The presence of the palate makes it possible to breathe and chew at the same time. When food is swallowed, the soft palate rises up and blocks off the entrance to the rear nasal passage. When food is not being swallowed, this passage is open, making it possible to breathe through the mouth and through the **nose**. As well, prior to swallowing food is pressed up against the palate and pushed to the back of the throat using the tongue.

The palate also functions in speaking and singing. When sound emerges from the chest, the sound waves that have been produced by the **vocal cords** bounce off the hard palate and out the mouth. The hard palate directs and resonates.

Formation of the palate occurs during development of the fetus. Improper formation of the hard palate occurs in one of every 500-1000 babies. This condition, called cleft palate, is correctable by surgery. Its cause is still unresolved. A combination of inherited traits and some environmental factors in the mother's womb are suspected of causing the abnormality.

The uvula is implicated in snoring and **sleep** apnea (interrupted breathing during sleep). Treatment involves removal of excess flesh from the uvula.