

Dental care - thumb sucking

Sucking on fingers or thumbs is healthy and normal when children are infants. Most children stop somewhere between two and four years of age. The effects of thumb sucking are usually reversible up until the age of seven, because children still have their deciduous (baby) teeth. If thumb sucking continues beyond the age of seven, when the second teeth are erupting, permanent dental problems can occur.

Problems caused by thumb and finger sucking

Excessive thumb sucking may lead to:

- **Buck teeth** - for example, the front teeth may be pushed out of alignment. This can alter the shape of the face and lead to an open bite.
- **A lisp** - pre-school children who suck their fingers and thumbs can push their teeth out of their normal position. This interferes with the correct formation of certain speech sounds.

Helping children to stop the habit

There are various things you can do to help your child stop thumb sucking. Focussing on the positives and rewarding your child are important. Depending on your child's age and ability, you might like to try:

- **Reward your child and offer encouragement** - for example, with a hug or praise, to reinforce their decision to stop the habit.
- **Limit nagging** - if children feel they are being nagged they will become defensive.
- **Mark their progress on a calendar** - for example, place a star or a tick for each period (such as a day or week) that the child does not suck their thumb or finger. Provide a special outing or a toy if the child gets through the period successfully.
- **Encourage bonding** - for example, with a special toy.
- **Reminders** - give the child a mitten to wear as a reminder not to suck, or place unpleasant tasting nail paint (available from chemists) on the fingers or thumb. Placing a bandaid over the thumb at bedtime is another reminder.
- **Offer distractions** - while a child is watching TV, have toys available for children to play with. Sit with the child during this time and give a cuddle to help them not to suck. In the car, have toys available to keep children occupied.

How often to reward your child

Younger children need more frequent rewards. A five to six year old may need a reward after the first night. You can gradually stretch out the reward period from one night, to a week and then to 30 days without thumb sucking.

It may take several attempts

Children can easily drift back to their old habit and it may take several attempts before the habit is completely broken. Remember to be patient and that the first few days without sucking are usually the worst.

Where to get help

- Your dental professional (dentist or dental therapist)
- Your pharmacist
- Your Community Dental Health service
- Your Maternal and Child Health nurse.

Things to remember

- Children usually stop thumb and finger sucking between two and four years of age.

- Thumb and finger sucking after seven years of age may cause dental problems.
- It takes patience to help your child stop the habit.
- Rewarding your child for not thumb sucking may help.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Dental Health Services Victoria

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