

Dental care - dummies

Many parents are concerned about the effect of a dummy on their child's teeth and mouth. Sucking a dummy or thumb purely for the sensation is thought to be a natural act of the newborn. However, a child's teeth and the shape of their mouth may be affected if sucking persists to school age, once the permanent teeth begin to erupt.

Most dentists or other oral health professionals advise parents not to be concerned about the effects of dummy or thumb/finger sucking on a child's teeth before school age, when the permanent teeth erupt.

Making dummies safe

The following safety precautions should be observed:

- Serious and rapid tooth decay can result if dummies are dipped in sugary substances such as honey, jam, condensed milk, malt or vitamin C syrups.
- Sucking your child's dummy can increase the risk of tooth decay by transferring bacteria from your mouth to the child's.
- Dummies may be a source of infection if they are shared by other children or picked up from the floor. Follow good hygiene procedures when using dummies and check that dummies are in good condition and meet safety approval ratings.

Dummy overuse

Overuse or incorrect use of a dummy, or prolonged use (beyond school age or once permanent teeth begin to erupt) may lead to oral health problems such as:

- **Incorrect positioning of teeth** – upper teeth may be pushed forward
- **Tooth decay (especially the front teeth)** – if the dummy is dipped in sugary substances such as honey before sucking.
- **Mouth breathing** – your child may tend to breathe through their mouth rather than their nose. This is often linked to long-term dribbling.
- **Speech and language problems** – your child may not use the full range of tongue movements that are necessary for making all the speech sounds and may have fewer opportunities to use sounds to communicate.

Encourage a child to stop dummy use

Most children stop sucking dummies, fingers or thumbs between the ages of two and four years. However, prolonged sucking beyond six to seven years of age (when permanent teeth begin to come through) may cause tooth and mouth problems. If the habit continues into primary school years seek advice from a dentist or other oral health professional.

Children should be given the opportunity to stop their dummy habit (wean) spontaneously. Abrupt weaning from the dummy is not recommended, as it often leads to other negative oral habits such as finger sucking. Persist gently but firmly, with good humour. Remember that the first few days are likely to be the most difficult and it may take several attempts before the habit is completely broken.

Dummy sucking versus thumb/finger sucking

Studies of thumb/finger suckers show they have a greater problem in breaking their habit than dummy suckers. One advantage of the dummy over finger sucking is that the dummy can be gently removed when the child goes to sleep. This helps establish the habit of sleeping without either dummy or thumb/finger sucking.

Where to get help

- Your dentist or oral health professional
- Your maternal and child health nurse
- Your doctor
- Your public oral health service
- Community dental clinic Tel. 1300 360 054
- The Royal Dental Hospital Melbourne, general dental enquiries Tel. (03) 9341 1000 or 1800 833 039 (from rural Victoria) Monday to Friday, 8:30am–5pm. For emergencies Tel. 1300 360 054 Monday to Friday, 8.30am–9.15pm, weekends and public holidays, 9am–9.15pm.

All children 12 years and under are eligible for priority public oral health services. Children receive general oral health advice as well as dental check-ups and treatment. For eligibility information call 1300 360 054, Dental Health Services Victoria

Things to remember

- Dummy sucking is not thought to be a problem for oral health in the very early years but should be stopped before permanent teeth appear in the mouth.
- Sucking can have permanent impacts on the mouth and teeth if it persists into school age, once the permanent teeth begin to erupt.
- Dummies need to be clean, free of sugary substances and safe.

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

Dental Health Services Victoria

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