

## 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, after the eruption of adult teeth. The changes can then become permanent.

Most dentists advise parents not to be concerned about the effects of dummy or thumb sucking on a child's teeth before school age, although there may be other reasons why it is beneficial for your child to stop the dummy habit earlier.

### Making dummies safe

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 also 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), may lead to mouth and dental problems such as:

- **Incorrect positioning of teeth** – teeth may be pushed forward so that the bottom and top teeth at the front don't meet properly.
- **Tooth decay (especially the front teeth)** – if the dummy is dipped into sweet things 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.

### Encouraging your child to stop

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 dental 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 sucking

Studies of thumb suckers show that 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 sucking.

### Where to get help

- Your dentist
- Your Maternal and Child Health nurse
- Your local community dental clinic Tel. 1300 360 054

## Things to remember

- Dummy sucking is not thought to be a problem for dental care 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.
- Dummies need to be clean, free of sugary substances and safe.

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Dental Health Services Victoria

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