
Thumb and finger sucking

Summary

- In many children sucking a dummy, thumb or finger can cause changes to the teeth and jaws.
 - The younger a child stops sucking a dummy, thumb or finger, the more likely their teeth and jaws will correct any associated growth problems naturally.
 - Children usually stop thumb and finger sucking between two and four years of age.
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Sucking on fingers or thumbs is healthy and normal when children are very young. Most children stop somewhere between two and four years of age.

In many children sucking a dummy, thumb or finger can cause changes to the teeth and jaws. The younger a child stops the more likely their teeth and jaws will correct the growth problems naturally.

If children are still sucking their dummy, thumb or finger when their adult teeth come through there is a much higher risk of permanent changes to the growth of their teeth and jaw.

Problems caused by thumb or finger sucking

Long-time thumb sucking may lead to:

- an overbite (buck teeth) – for example, the front teeth may be pushed further forward than normal. This can change the shape of the face
- an open bite – when the top and bottom teeth don't meet. With teeth together you would expect top and bottom teeth to overlap a little bit. If there is a gap between them where the tongue could poke through, this could be 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, such as the pronunciation of s and z.

Helping children stop thumb or finger sucking

Most children stop sucking their fingers or thumb somewhere between two and four years of age. Give your child the chance to stop their habit when they are ready, giving plenty of support and encouragement.

Depending on your child's age and ability, you might like to:

- give lots of encouragement – for example, with a hug or praise to show that they're doing something good by trying to stop
- use distractions – entertain them with a toy or give them a cuddle to distract them from sucking
- show their progress– give a special outing or a toy if the child goes for a certain period without sucking. You can gradually stretch out the period from one night to a week, and then to 30 days
- use reminders – give children who suck their thumb or finger a glove to wear as a reminder not to suck. The child must be willing to stop for this to work.

Children can easily drift back to their old habit and it may take some time before the habit is completely broken. Keep trying gently, but firmly. Be patient, as the first few days are usually the worst.

Try not to nag. If children feel they are being nagged, they may become angry and continue the habit.

Where to get help

- Your maternal and child health nurse
- Your dentist
- **Dental Health Services Victoria** provides public dental services through the Royal Dental Hospital Melbourne and community dental clinics, for eligible people. For more information about public dental services Tel. (03) 9341 1000, or 1800 833 039 outside Melbourne metro
- **Australian Dental Association 'Find a Dentist'** search function or Tel. (03) 8825 4600
- Orthodontist
- **Better Health Channel – Seeing a dentist or dental health practitioner**

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