Thumb sucking

Summary

- In many children sucking a dummy, thumb or finger can cause changes to the teeth and jaws.
- The younger the age at which 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.

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 the age at which 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 the teeth and jaws.

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 they would otherwise be. This can change the shape of the face
- an open bite is when the top and bottom front teeth don’t meet when the mouth is closed (normally the upper teeth slightly overlap the bottom teeth). If there is a gap between the upper and lower front teeth 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 can interfere with the correct formation of certain speech sounds.

Helping children stop the habit

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, give them 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 or adhesive bandage 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 hardest.

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

If these approaches don’t work, you could ask your pharmacist about paint on solutions that deter finger or thumb sucking. You can also ask your dentist for advice.
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

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

Dental Health Services Victoria

Content on this website is provided for information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not in any way endorse or support such therapy, service, product or treatment and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. The information and materials contained on this website are not intended to constitute a comprehensive guide concerning all aspects of the therapy, product or treatment described on the website. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions and to ascertain whether the particular therapy, service, product or treatment described on the website is suitable in their circumstances. The State of Victoria and the Department of Health & Human Services shall not bear any liability for reliance by any user on the materials contained on this website.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

**Copyright © 1999/2019** State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.