

Thumb and Finger Sucking

Thumb and finger sucking is a healthy, normal and natural habit for infants. The need for sucking is greatest in the first 6 months of life for most children. It can be very comforting and calming. Some infants have a greater need than others to pacify themselves by sucking. For breastfed babies, thumb and finger sucking may be a sign that the infant needs to be put to the breast more often.

Oral Effects of Thumb and Finger Sucking



The strong muscle action used for thumb and finger sucking can change the shape of the mouth and the position of the teeth and lips.

Thumb and finger sucking is usually not a concern, unless any of the following are present:

- sucking that is forceful enough to cause a dent or callous on the thumb or finger,
- sucking continuously during the day,
- sucking throughout the night rather than just at bedtime,
- sucking that changes the position of the teeth, or the shape of the mouth and/or lips, or
- sucking along with tongue thrusting (when tongue moves past the front teeth when speaking or swallowing) and speech problems.

Even if you do not notice changes to your child's mouth, it is best if your child stops sucking his thumb or finger before the permanent teeth come in.

If you are concerned that your child may be sucking too hard, too long, too often or is unable to give up the habit, you should consult a health professional.

Tips for Parents

Parents need to keep in mind that thumb and finger sucking during childhood is normal and that most children will give up the habit when they are ready.

The Canadian Dental Association recommends a child's first visit to the dentist at age one. If your child is sucking a thumb or finger, be sure to tell your dentist. Ask your dentist to watch for changes to your child's mouth.

If you want to help your child stop thumb and finger sucking, here are some tips:

- Change routines that cause your child to suck their thumb or finger.
- Offer a small toy to cuddle at nap or bedtime to replace the habit.
- Praise your child when they do not suck their thumb.
- Provide encouragement and gentle reminders to help stop the habit.
- Reward your child for not sucking with a favourite activity.
- Track their progress on a calendar with stickers.

For further information, contact the dental health educator at your local public health office.

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