

Can thumb sucking be harmful to my child's teeth?



Why do children suck on thumbs or pacifiers?

This type of sucking is completely normal for babies and young children. Sucking is a natural reflex and young children suck their thumbs to help them feel secure and happy, and since it is relaxing, it also helps induce sleep. In fact, babies begin to suck on their fingers or thumbs before even being born.

Is thumb sucking bad for the teeth and jaws?

If children are still sucking their thumbs beyond the age of 4 or when the permanent teeth arrive, this habit can create crowded, crooked teeth or bite problems. Prolonged thumb sucking can cause "open bites" that require extensive orthodontic treatment to straighten out. It may also make the front teeth protrude, which make the teeth more susceptible to injury. Children who aggressively suck their thumbs for an extended period of time can even irreversibly change their jawbone structure.



What should I do if my child persists in the habit of thumb sucking?

Most children will eventually stop thumb sucking on their own. However, many parents find that the use of a pacifier makes the sucking habit easier to break, as you simply take the pacifier away at the appropriate age.



However, if thumb sucking persists past the age of 4 we recommend talking to your child to encourage them to stop the behaviour with rewards and praise. A glove or mitten placed over the hand may be enough of a deterrent. Sometimes, an adhesive bandage or tape wrapped around the thumb or finger can help break the habit. It's best to try to break the habit before the permanent teeth come in, usually around age 6.

If you are concerned about the effects of prolonged thumb sucking we suggest talking to your dentist. They may recommend other ways to change the behaviour, including a mouth appliance which interferes with the sucking habit.

