



## **THUMB SUCKING AND PACIFIER USE**

Thumb sucking is when children suck on their thumbs when they feel insecure or need comfort. Infants, toddlers, and young children may naturally suck on their thumbs, fingers, pacifiers, or other objects to soothe themselves and help them fall asleep.

### **How thumb sucking affects teeth**

Thumb sucking can cause problems with the mouth's structure if it persists beyond the toddler years. When a child continues to suck their thumb or fingers, it may cause problems with the proper growth of the mouth and alignment of the permanent teeth. Pacifiers have a similar impact but is usually an easier habit to break.

Prolonged thumb sucking can cause future dental problems including improper development of the teeth, jaw, and palate, and can also change how your child eats and speaks, causing a lisp or other speech impediments.

The intensity of the sucking determines whether or not dental problems may result. Children who passively rest their thumbs in their mouths are less likely to have dental problems, compared to those who vigorously suck their thumbs. Aggressive thumb suckers may develop problems with their baby (primary) teeth and their adult teeth, which can require braces, or in more severe cases, jaw surgery, to correct.

### **When do children stop sucking their thumbs?**

Children usually stop thumb sucking between the ages of two and four years old, or by the time the permanent front teeth come in. If you notice changes in your child's primary teeth or are concerned about your child's thumb sucking, talk to your dentist.

### **Preventing and stopping thumb sucking**

- Praise your child for not thumb sucking.
- Correct the cause of anxiety and comfort the child.
- Involve older children in choosing the method of stopping thumb sucking.
- Your dentist can talk to your child and explain how thumb sucking may damage their teeth and why it is important to stop.



After trying the tips, if thumb sucking continues, remind the child of their habit by bandaging the thumb or putting a sock on the hand at night. The dentist or pediatrician may recommend the use of a mouth appliance<sup>1</sup> or an application of bitter gel, liquid, or cream to coat the thumb and discourage thumb sucking.

### **For more information**

For more information, contact the Division of Public Health, Bureau of Oral Health and Dental Services at 302-622-4540 and [www.dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dph/hsm/ohphome.html](http://www.dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dph/hsm/ohphome.html).

### **Resources**

1. American Dental Association. 2020. *Thumbsucking and Pacifier Use*. In Mouth Healthy. Retrieved July 17, 2020 from <https://www.mouthhealthy.org/en/az-topics/t/thumbsucking>