

Is non-nutritive sucking normal?

Non-nutritive sucking, the sucking of thumbs, fingers, pacifiers and other inanimate objects is a normal infant behavior; however millions of people continue the habit well beyond early childhood. Unfortunately they risk significant and often preventable dental, speech, learning and emotional problems. There are biological, chemical and psychological elements to the sucking behavior.

Why do babies suck their thumbs?

Babies have a natural urge to suck, which usually decreases after the age of 6 months. But many babies continue to suck their thumbs to soothe themselves. Thumb-sucking can become a habit when it is used to comfort themselves; when they feel hungry, afraid, restless, quiet, sleepy, or bored. Toddlers suck their thumbs too. Little by little, most children stop on their own between ages 3 and 6. As the child grows older, sucking becomes a way to handle stress, and that dependence grows more profound each year.

Does thumb-sucking cause any problems?

Prolonged thumb-sucking may cause a child to develop dental problems. Thumb-sucking can cause a child's teeth to become improperly aligned (malocclusion) or push the teeth

outward, sometimes malforming the roof (upper palate) of the mouth. Malocclusion usually corrects itself when the child stops thumb-sucking. But the longer thumb-sucking continues, the more likely it is that orthodontic treatment will be needed to correct any resulting dental problems. A child may also develop speech problems, including mispronouncing certain consonants, lisping, and thrusting out the tongue when talking

Before and after pictures of thumb suckers



At what point does thumb-sucking become a problem?

Thumb-sucking in children younger than four is usually not a problem. Children who suck their thumbs frequently or with great intensity after the age of 4 or

5 or those who continue to suck their thumbs after age 5 are at risk for dental or speech problems. Many feel embarrassed or are teased or shamed by other people because of the behavior.

Early intervention is important to prevent and minimize the problems associated with thumb sucking. The longer the behavior persists, the more difficult it will be to eliminate the sucking activity because the strength of the emotional dependency increases with time. Treatment to eliminate the habit can begin prior to eruption of permanent teeth.

When to begin therapy

Researchers have discovered that a child's thought processes and perceptions of the world are very different depending on their age and state of emotional and intellectual development. The decision to eliminate a sucking habit depends when the child is able to:

- Understand cause-and-effect
- Comprehend concepts of time
- Can do something out of a sense of pride
- Discriminate between right and wrong
- Practice some degree of self-control and self-denial

If you need outside help

Some people feel more confident if they have the help of a professional third party. Pursuing therapy with a certified orofacial myologist can help you understand the combination of body chemistry and psychological circumstance in the sucking behavior.

Children are often best motivated by a caring third party who can offer guidance and support that will make the transition as smooth as possible. The therapist enters the child's world as a partner and facilitator, enabling the youngster to feel confident and comfortable. This prompts most children to respond with cooperation, consistency, and minimal frustration. In addition they have the potential to experience feelings of success from the very first day of therapy.

It is time to enlist the help of a certified orofacial myologist if:

- You have tried to communicate with your child about making an effort to discontinue the sucking habit but have not been able to motivate her.
- You have already tried many techniques to eliminate your child's sucking activity without success.

- Gentle reminders have turned into nagging, and the atmosphere in your home has become one of conflict, antagonism, and frustration.
- One parent is not consistent about following through or supporting the necessary procedures.
- There are two or more children in one family with a sucking habit.

At What Age Can Therapy Begin?

Age five is an ideal age to begin a modified program of treatment to help children discontinue thumb or finger sucking habits when intellectual and emotional skills are adequately developed. With early elimination of these habits, there is often spontaneous improvement in dental, speech and OMD problems.

Children as young as four years old can benefit from an in-office evaluation. Children seven or eight years of age are often good candidates to receive orofacial myofunctional therapy. They are most often anxious to please adults and usually work well with the therapist. Motivated teenagers and adults of all ages are capable of success in treatment.

Non-Nutritive Sucking



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