



ORAL HEALTH KANSAS

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Tips and Tricks: Thumbsucking



Many babies begin to suck their fingers or thumbs before they are even born. This “digit sucking” satisfies a psychological need. A baby’s sucking needs vary widely, beginning as early as 9 months and lasting from 18-36 months.

Benefits of sucking

- Comforts child in stressful situations, helping them feel secure and happy
- Helps some children get to sleep
- Helps distinguish between a hungry and a fussy baby



While non-nutritive sucking has benefits, prolonged sucking, especially on a thumb, can also cause harm.

Dangers of prolonged sucking

- Developmental problems such as crowded teeth, open bite, tongue thrust, and speech delays
- Increased risk of middle ear infections
- Over dependence on thumb or pacifier for comfort
- Negative social impact on older children



The frequency, duration, and intensity of a habit will determine if dental problems may result. Children who rest their thumbs passively in their mouths are less likely to have damage than those who vigorously suck their thumbs.

When to stop?

There is a wide variation between experts on when to stop a thumb sucking habit. Most suggest between the ages of 2 and 3 years. Trying to stop when a child isn’t ready can be frustrating, but when it is time, there are several strategies to try that have proven effective over time. **Look for these ideas in our Tips & Tricks on “Kicking the Habit”.**

