

# Thumbs, Fingers, and Pacifiers



Does your baby suck his thumb or use a pacifier? Don't worry, these habits are very common and have a soothing and calming effect. All babies are born with the need to suck. Some infants even suck their thumbs before they are born, and some will do it soon after. Read on to learn more about thumb and finger sucking, and the use of pacifiers.

## Thumb and finger sucking

Most children suck their thumbs or fingers at some time in their early life. The only time it might be a concern is if it goes on past 6 to 8 years of age or affects the shape of your child's mouth or teeth.

## Pacifiers

If your baby wants to suck beyond what nursing or bottle-feeding provides, a pacifier will satisfy that need. Pacifiers will not harm your baby. In fact, there is some evidence that pacifiers may help reduce the risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). However, use the following tips when giving your baby a pacifier:

- If you are breastfeeding, wait until your baby is 1 month old before using a pacifier.
- Do not use a pacifier to replace or delay meals. Only offer it when you are sure your baby is not hungry.
- Do not force your baby to take the pacifier if she doesn't want it. It may be tempting to give it to your baby when it is easy for you. However, it is best to let your child decide when to use it.
- Never tie a pacifier to your child's crib or around your child's neck or hand. This is very dangerous and could cause serious injury or even death.

## How to help your child stop

As a first step in dealing with your child's sucking habits, ignore them! Most often, they will stop on their own. Harsh words, teasing, or punishment may upset your child and is not an effective way to get rid of habits. Instead, try the following:

- Praise and reward your child when he does not suck his thumb or use the pacifier. Star charts, daily rewards, and gentle reminders, especially during the day, are also very helpful.
- If your child uses sucking to relieve boredom, keep his hands busy or distract him with things he finds fun.
- If you see changes in the roof of your child's mouth (palate) or in the way the teeth are lining up, talk to your pediatrician or pediatric dentist. There are devices that can be put in the mouth that make it uncomfortable to suck on a finger or thumb.

No matter what method you try, be sure to explain them to your child.

If they make your child afraid or tense, stop them at once.

## Shopping for a pacifier

When buying a pacifier, keep the following points in mind:

- Look for a 1-piece model that has a soft nipple (some models can break into 2 pieces).
- The shield should be at least 1½ inches across, so a baby cannot put the entire pacifier into her mouth. Also, the shield should be made of firm plastic with air holes.
- Make sure the pacifier is dishwasher-safe. Follow the instructions on the pacifier and either boil it or run it through the dishwasher before your baby uses it. Be sure to squeeze the water out of the nipple with clean hands, otherwise the hot water inside might burn your baby's mouth. Clean it this way frequently until your baby is 6 months old so that your child is not exposed to germs. After that you can just wash it with soap and rinse it in clear water.
- Pacifiers come in different sizes. You will also find a variety of nipple shapes, from squarish "orthodontic" versions to the standard bottle type. Try different kinds until you find the one your baby prefers.
- Buy some extras. Pacifiers have a way of getting lost or falling on the floor or street when you need them most.
- Do not use the nipple from a baby bottle as a pacifier. If the baby sucks hard, the nipple may pop out of the ring and choke her.
- Pacifiers fall apart over time. Some manufacturers have expiration dates for the pacifier. Do not keep pacifiers past that time. Inspect them every once in a while to see whether the rubber has changed color or has torn. If so, replace them.

The good news is that most children stop their sucking habits before they get very far in school. This is because of peer pressure. While your child might still use sucking as a way of going to sleep or calming down when upset, this is usually done in private and is not harmful. Putting too much pressure on your child to stop may cause more harm than good. Be assured your child will eventually stop the habit on his own.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

## From your doctor

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