

## Thumb Sucking 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. The need to suck is present in all infants. Some infants suck their thumbs even before they are born, and some will do it right after being born.

Most children suck their thumbs or fingers at some time in their early life. Many thumb or finger suckers stop by age 6 or 7 months. The only time it might cause you concern is if it goes on beyond 6 to 8 years of age or affects the shape of your child's mouth or teeth. 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.

Children who suck their thumbs past 6 to 8 years often get teased by friends, brothers, sisters, and relatives. Sometimes these comments are enough to get the child to stop. If not, talk to your pediatrician about other ways to help your child stop.

Some children don't suck their thumbs, instead they rely on a pacifier. Pacifiers usually elicit strong responses from parents and caregivers. Some oppose their use because of the way they look. Some resent the idea of "pacifying" a baby with an object. Others believe that using a pacifier can harm a baby. This is not true. Pacifiers do not cause any medical or psychological problems. If your baby wants to suck beyond what nursing or bottlefeeding provides, a pacifier will satisfy that need.

However, a pacifier should not be used to replace or delay meals. Offer a pacifier only after or between feedings, when you are sure your baby is not hungry. If your child is hungry, and you offer a pacifier as a substitute, he may become so upset that it interferes with feeding. It may be tempting to offer your child the pacifier when it is easy for you. But it is best to let your child decide whether and when to use it.

Some babies use a pacifier to fall asleep. The trouble is, they often wake up when it falls out of their mouths. Once your baby is older and has the skill to find and replace it, there is no problem. Until then, your child may cry for you to find the pacifier. Do not attempt to solve this problem by tying 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. Babies who suck their fingers or hands have a real advantage here, because their hands are always readily available.

If your child does take to a pacifier, be sure to provide one that is safe. When buying a pacifier, keep the following points in mind to be sure it is as safe as possible:

- Look for a one-piece model that has a soft nipple (some models can break into two pieces).
- The shield should be at least 1¼ 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. Clean it this way frequently until your baby is 6 months old so that

your child is not exposed to germs. After that, your baby is less likely to get an infection in that way, so you can just wash it with soap and rinse it in clear water.

- Pacifiers come in two sizes, one for the first 6 months and another for children after that age. For your baby's comfort, make sure the pacifier is the right size.
- You will also find a variety of nipple shapes, from squarish "orthodontic" versions to the standard bottle type. Try different shapes 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.
- Never tie a pacifier around your baby's neck or hand, or to your child's crib. The danger of serious injury or even death is too great.
- 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. Inspect them every once in a while to see whether the rubber has changed color or torn. If so, replace them.