



Bite

Word of mouth

19 MAY 2013

Featured

Should parents be concerned about thumb-sucking?

With a reported 80% of young children sucking their thumbs (or other fingers) at some point in their lives, it would seem that it's quite normal. And it is—sucking habits are perfectly normal in infancy as they will suck on anything brought in contact with the lips. It is an adaptive reflex behaviour common to mammals and may last for several years. However it is only normal until dental problems present as a result from intense and persistent digit sucking.

A child who thumb-sucks occasionally and soon grows out of it will most likely not develop any tooth or dental problems as a result. But children who begin sucking their thumbs from an early age, and continue to do so as the permanent teeth come in, may develop problems with tooth alignment and even the shape of roof of the mouth. Generally, if the habit is continued beyond six years of age (when the permanent teeth erupt) it will almost always impact the position of the teeth and jaw.

This kind of prolonged thumb-sucking can push the



upper front teeth out of alignment, so they don't meet the lower teeth correctly when biting. This condition is called a malocclusion. *Buck teeth* are when the upper teeth spread out from each other, with gaps in between. Another type of malocclusion is known as open bite, in which the upper and lower teeth do not meet at all and the tongue protrudes into the space between. Damage to the mouth's roof structure can also occur. Speech problems such as lisping can show up along with these abnormal dental conditions.

Orthodontic treatment may be required to correct advanced problems such as

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This month...

The last few months we have been fighting my four year-old daughter's thumb-sucking habit —and we're failing miserably.

Last week we tried the nail-polish and that backfired when she talked me into doing mine as well! I don't know what you call that flavour but may it never hit my taste-buds again.

So what can happen if your child has a thumb sucking habit? Is it going to destroy teeth and set you up for a certain date with the orthodontist?

Read this month's feature article to find out.

Dr Simon Franks



> continued

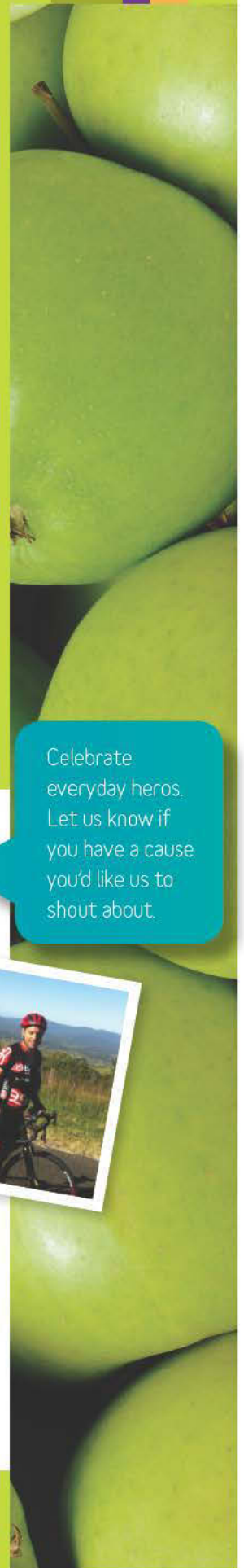
these. But prevention is usually the best treatment. Parents should pay attention to their child's thumb-sucking habits. Occasional and mild indulgence in thumb-sucking is usually not a cause for concern. Similarly, if the habit is discontinued by age two-three years, no permanent malformation will occur. But if your child's thumb-sucking habit is persistent and intense, it's best to take steps to control this behaviour sooner rather than later.

Folk remedies such as putting socks on the child's hands at bedtime can help, as long as the habit is not too deeply ingrained. Application of an adhesive tape or band-aid to the finger can also be a useful trick. In many instances this changes the character of the finger sufficiently to call the child's attention to the fact that it is being placed in the mouth. Chemical therapy employs either hot-tasting, bitter-flavoured



preparations or distasteful agents that are applied to the fingers or thumbs. Such things as cayenne pepper, quinine and asafoetida have been used to make the thumb and fingers so distasteful the child will keep them out of their mouth! Again these methods are most effective if the habit is not firmly entrenched.

The majority of older children who continue thumb-sucking, have what is termed an *empty habit*—it is something they have always done. These children are usually receptive to reasons why they should stop and many actually want to give up. Since children who suck their thumbs persistently often do so out of stress or boredom, correcting the underlying stressors may be advised. In these cases, consulting a professional who deals with behavioural issues will pay off with a happier child and fewer dental problems in the long run.



Celebrate everyday heroes. Let us know if you have a cause you'd like us to shout about.

Healthy Hygiene Hints

Toothbrush replacement

Most dentists agree you should change your toothbrush every three months. Studies show that after three months of normal wear and tear, toothbrushes are much less effective at removing plaque from teeth and gums compared to new ones. The bristles break down and lose their effectiveness in getting to all those tricky corners around your teeth.

It is also important to change toothbrushes after you've had a cold, the flu, a mouth infection or a sore throat. That's because germs can hide in toothbrush bristles and lead to reinfection. Even if you haven't been sick, fungus and bacteria can still develop in the bristles of your toothbrush—another reason to change your toothbrush regularly!

Jenna



Community

2013 Midi Smiddy Challenge

Rob Kropp is jumping on his bike riding to Warwick for the Midi Smiddy Challenge.

Held in memory of Adam Smiddy, who passed away to an aggressive cancer aged 26, the ride is a challenge event to raise funds for cancer research. More than \$3 million has been raised since 2006.

Mater Foundation is this year's major beneficiary with funds supporting world-class research in areas such as melanoma, prostate, breast and ovarian cancers as well as complementary therapies for cancer patients.

We've thrown in a few dollars to get Rob on his way, if you want to help out visit www.smiddy.org.au



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