



Getting It Straight

by Dr. Kirk Christensen,
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Q: How do habits like thumb sucking affect a child's bite?

A: Let us first recognize that teeth can be moved within the confines of the jaw bones with consistent pressure (force) over a period of time. This is proven daily in orthodontics, because without this ability, we could not do our work. In fact, we require very little force to move a tooth; sometimes as low as 18 grams (1/25th of a pound). Forces from oral habits like thumb/finger sucking, lip biting, and incorrect tongue posture/swallowing habits generate much higher forces than this. It is common to see upper front teeth (incisors) flared forward by thumb habits or tongue pressure habits, as the incisors are literally pried or pushed outward toward the upper lip. Beyond the fact that pressure from these habits may direct teeth into an undesired position, the habits are often responsible for preventing upper and lower teeth from coming together. Keep in mind that the goal of opposing teeth is to contact one another. They actually erupt toward each other until they reach contact, then they stop! It's amazing that they know to do this. Special nerve endings feed back information telling the body that contact is made and eruption should stop. The problem is, ANY constant contact between these opposing teeth will deliver the same message. Therefore, a thumb, lip, finger, tongue, cheek, or other foreign object that has established constant contact between the upper and lower teeth, satisfies the contact stimulus. We see open bites in both the front and back teeth areas due to these types of habits. The forces are often so consistent and strong, that they actually prevent orthodontic correction. In some cases, if we are able to override these forces during treatment, the tooth misalignment will return during retention, due to the ongoing habit. It is, therefore, essential to 1) recognize, and 2) modify or eliminate these types of habits if we are to successfully treat these orthodontic patients. I'm sure that my tongue thrust patients are nodding as they read this. It mystifies me that these problems are so often overlooked, ignored, or mismanaged. These habits are real, and are often devastating to a person's bite.

!Dr. Christensen's column appears weekly in the Northwest Herald. Questions to be answered and treatment inquiries may be directed to: **Woodstock Orthodontics, c/o Kirk H. Christensen, DDS, 226 West Judd Street, Woodstock, IL 60098, Phone: 815-337-5522**