

- Children—dental care



It's hard to keep up with the key ages, stages and signs our kids should go for orthodontic assessment. Here, orthodontist DR CATHERINE LEE gives us her expert advice for staying ahead of the game.

When to take your child to the orthodontist

Screening should be done by the age of seven. "The first permanent molars and incisors have usually come in by then, so any crowding, under/over/cross-bites, missing or misaligned adult tooth buds, and injury-prone dental protrusions can be evaluated," says Dr Lee. It's also the perfect time to flag and assess oral habits.

Signs to look out for at home

Dr Lee recommends coming for an appointment if your child is experiencing:

- early or late loss of baby teeth;
- new teeth coming through abnormally;
- pain or difficulty in chewing or biting;
- thumb- or finger-sucking;
- constant mouth breathing; or
- teeth that aren't meeting properly.

Thumb-sucking and pacifier habits

These are oral habits worth breaking early. "The pressure of a thumb, finger or pacifier resting on the gums can interfere with normal tooth eruption and even jaw growth," says Dr Lee. Long-term suction pressure can cause upper and lower teeth misalignment, and malformation of the upper jawbone.

"Some thumb-suckers develop an 'open bite,'" she adds, "which is associated with speech development problems, including tongue-thrusting and lisping, and protruding front teeth that are prone to fracturing during play and sporting activities."

If your child won't stop the habit, or they've stopped but the teeth or jaw structure are already impacted, seek help! Dr Lee often treats with a habit breaker – an orthodontic appliance used to widen the top jaw and discourage the habit. She also has treatments to correct jaw growth problems and displaced teeth. Early screening allows for prompt interceptive work that will minimise complications in the future.

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