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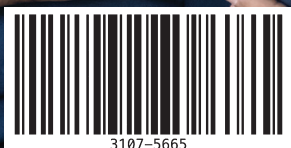
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INSIDE

# A LIFETIME IN YOUR MOUTH

Your teeth's journey through different stages—thumb-sucking, crowding, pregnancy-related gum bleeding, nighttime grinding—and how catching each one early can spare years of correction later

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**BY: DR S SABERITHA**  
**PHOTOGRAPHS: SOURCED**





Navanith Narayan Gorantla began sucking his thumb at four months. His mother used a bitter-tasting cream to get him to stop

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If you had met Aryan Kapoor as a toddler, chances are you would have found him with his thumb firmly in his mouth. The seven-year-old began sucking his thumb at six months and kept at it until he was almost six, far longer than his parents had expected.

The habit showed up mostly at bedtime, as he drifted off to sleep, and also during quiet moments when Aryan was absorbed in his favourite show or upset and needed comfort. "It was a self-soothing habit for him," says his mother Geetanjali Kapoor, a schoolteacher based in Andheri, Mumbai. She tried a thumb guard at night, and although it helped a little, "he would still find ways around it during the day."

The turning point came during a visit to The Dental Arch in Bandra West, Mumbai, when its co-founder Dr Kanika Madan showed Aryan and his parents a model of his teeth, revealing what years of thumb sucking had done. His upper front teeth had begun to protrude, and his bite was slowly shifting.

Habit-breaking therapy and a run of follow-up visits put his dental growth back on track. "We were relieved that we addressed it before the problem became more severe," says Geetanjali.

Aryan's story is only the first chapter in a much longer journey. From infancy to adulthood, our teeth and gums move through predictable stages, and each stage leaves its own imprint: a thumb

sucked for too many years, plaque hardening into calculus in the 20s, pregnancy hormones inflaming gums, and midlife stress expressed not in words but through clenched jaws.

Across conversations with dentists and people, one thread emerges repeatedly: small, unglamorous habits that seem insignificant today often shape tomorrow's treatments or regrets.

### THE THUMB HABIT

Sucking is one of the earliest reflexes a baby develops, and Dr Kanika says sucking one's thumb is a natural habit in infants. "But if it continues beyond the age of 4-5 years, it can significantly affect a child's dental and jaw development," she says.

Most children naturally stop between the ages of two and four. Problems arise when the habit persists beyond that, especially after the permanent front teeth begin erupting around five or six years of age.

"A child who sucks vigorously, applying steady pressure through the night, pushes the upper front teeth forward and the lower ones back, and narrows the roof of the mouth. This can eventually affect sounds such as s, z, t and d," says Dr Kanika.

A 2026 study published in the *European Journal of Paediatric Dentistry* says that breastfeeding supports healthy jaw development and reduces the risk of misaligned teeth. In contrast, bottle-fed children appear more likely to develop prolonged thumb-sucking and pacifier habits, which may contribute to alignment problems.

This was the case with Navanith Narayan Gorantla, who began sucking his thumb between feeds after his parents switched to formula at four months. "As a nutritionist, I was concerned that thumb sucking was affecting his interest in food," says his mother, Sirisha Gorantla.

By the time Navanith was 20 months old, his front teeth had begun moving forward. "He was always sucking his thumb. While walking, sleeping, watching rhymes and even playing," adds Sirisha.



Poornima Mallikarjun Angadi is now smiling confidently after getting braces to rectify her crowded and protruding teeth

**"Bruxism is a condition, not a disease, where most people grind their teeth unconsciously, leading to gradual loss of tooth enamel"**

—Dr Srinivas Sivashankaran,  
orthodontist, Prashanth Hospitals, Chennai

She tried plasters and other home fixes before turning to a bitter-tasting cream applied to his nails. Although Navanith vomited the first time he tasted it, the approach worked. "Within one use, he stopped keeping his thumb in his mouth, and slept without it," Sirisha says.

Dr Kanika's advice leans away from such unpleasant interventions and towards encouragement instead. "Praise thumb-free days rather than scolding, and replace the comfort of sucking with a book, some music, or a game that keeps both hands busy," she says.

### CALCULUS: NOT MATH, BUT JUST AS TOUGH

Fast forward a decade, and the mouth faces a different kind of challenge, hidden in the crowded corners of a youngster's teeth.

Poornima Mallikarjun Angadi, a 20-year-old engineering student from Raichur, Karnataka, was never confident about her smile due to her protruding teeth. When she decided to have it rectified with braces in September 2025, her dentist found another problem: a yellowish layer of deposits on her crowded teeth.

“Crowded teeth create tightly packed areas where it is hard for the toothbrush’s bristles to penetrate,” explains Dr Vidhi Dhakrya Khanna, senior dental surgeon, Kailash Hospital, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh.

Food particles and bacteria settle into these gaps and build up as plaque within hours. Left undisturbed, saliva hardens that plaque into calculus, a deposit that attaches firmly to the tooth. The result is bleeding gums, bad breath and gingivitis. This pattern can appear even in young adults who believe they maintain good oral hygiene.

“Once the calculus is formed, it can only be removed through scaling by a dentist,”

adds Dr Vidhi.

That was the first time Poornima, who also had bleeding gums, underwent scaling or professional dental cleaning. Back then, she brushed only once a day. But the experience changed her routine for good. Braces make already difficult areas harder to clean, so professional cleaning became necessary.

Dr Vidhi points out that straightening crowded teeth with braces or aligners offers a hygiene benefit beyond appearance. Aligned teeth allow a toothbrush and floss to reach every surface, reducing the chances of plaque building up again.

Vijay N, a 27-year-old operations support professional

from Bengaluru, also faced a similar problem. He had stubborn black stains on his teeth that no amount of brushing could remove. “The discolouration could be due to food stains,” he says. He had his teeth scaled in 2024, and has since focused on maintaining a clean mouth to prevent accumulation of deposits.

## PREGNANCY'S HIDDEN EFFECT

Pregnancy introduces another chapter, one driven by hormones and not habit.

Padmhavathi Jayakanth, a technical analyst in Ontario, Canada, spent the last five

Padmhavathi Jayakanth had bleeding gums in the first five months of her pregnancy, which eased after childbirth





Komal Yadav  
experienced teeth  
sensitivity during  
her pregnancy  
and avoided  
trigger foods



**“Thumb sucking is a natural habit in infants, but if it continues beyond the age of four to five years, it can significantly affect a child’s dental and jaw development”**

**—Dr Kanika Madan,**  
co-founder, The Dental Arch, Mumbai

months of her pregnancy this year dreading something as routine as brushing her teeth.

Describing her fear, the 28-year-old says: “I suffered from bleeding gums, and it felt like my gums were going to come off.” There was no pain, just constant bleeding that made her wary of even a soft toothbrush. Fortunately, the bleeding eased soon after childbirth.

In 2025, Komal Yadav, 29, experienced a milder version during her pregnancy. “I had teeth sensitivity, especially with hot or cold food and drinks,” says the teacher from Rewari, Haryana.

She managed by avoiding trigger foods, switching to a toothpaste for sensitive teeth and brushing more gently.

Dr Vidhi explains that rising progesterone and oestrogen levels during pregnancy make gums more reactive to the plaque bacteria already present in the mouth.

She recalls treating a 28-year-old woman who, at 24 weeks of pregnancy, developed swollen gums that bled spontaneously for nearly two months. The inflammation resolved within a few weeks of scaling, and the rest of the pregnancy progressed without

complications.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 60 to 75 per cent of pregnant women develop some form of gingivitis. If untreated, it can progress to periodontitis, a deeper infection that wears away the bone supporting each tooth, causing the tooth to loosen and leading to extraction. Research also links periodontitis during pregnancy to a higher risk of preterm birth and low birth weight.

Dr Vidhi advises expectant mothers to maintain gentle but thorough brushing and flossing and not to delay

| LIFE STAGE                 | WATCH FOR                                                                   | WHAT HELPS                                                                        |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Infancy–early childhood    | Thumb or pacifier sucking continuing past age 4–5                           | Praise thumb-free days; replace the habit with books, music or games              |
| Early teens, teens and 20s | Cavities, bleeding gums, bad breath, yellowish deposits along crowded teeth | Filling, professional cleaning (scaling), aligners or braces to align the teeth   |
| Pregnancy                  | Gums that bleed easily or feel swollen, new tooth sensitivity               | Gentle brushing and flossing; a second-trimester dental visit is considered safe  |
| Midlife                    | Morning jaw soreness, headaches, worn or flattened teeth                    | A night guard or soft splint; stress-management routines like breathing exercises |

professional cleaning if their gums start bleeding. “An appointment in the second trimester is usually considered safe,” she says.

She further notes that frequent vomiting during pregnancy exposes teeth to stomach acid, which may weaken enamel and increase sensitivity. To help expectant mothers protect their teeth, she recommends rinsing

with water and waiting at least 30 minutes before brushing.

### THE NIGHTLY GRIND

By midlife, the source of damage shifts. Rather than outside forces, the mouth begins to respond to what is happening inside.

Aishwarya Sathish Kumar,

42, a homemaker from Texas, US, first noticed two years ago that her lower teeth had shifted forward. She also bit the inside of her cheek so often that she developed mouth sores regularly.

A dentist examined her in mid-2024 and asked whether she clenched or ground her teeth. The answer connected the dots for her: the pressure of raising two teenagers, a



For Aishwarya Sathish Kumar, the pressure of raising two teenagers was showing on her teeth



Anika Kukreja has managed her tooth troubles with aligners and meditation

16-year-old and a 13-year-old, was showing on her teeth.

"You can't yell at your children, so you hold that anger back, and I think I clenched my teeth a lot more than I usually would while dealing with my teenagers," she says.

Aishwarya was prescribed a night guard but gave it up within two months. She now practises slow breathing and jaw exercises before bed and catches herself mid-clench multiple times a day. "I no longer get those sores," she says.

Anger and unspoken stress ran through Anika Kukreja's account too. The 38-year-old business consultant, based in Gurugram, Haryana, says her teeth grinding was rooted in years of anxiety, from her teenage years to her late 20s.

"My anger was very high, and it led me to grinding," says Anika. The consequences are visible: sensitivity, two cracked canines, and flattened biting surfaces with no sharpness.

After a complete dental assessment, Anika has been advised to use aligners. "I wish someone had guided me earlier that it was my anxiety," she says, crediting meditation with doing more for her than any dental aid. "I wish I knew this in my 20s," she adds.

"When an individual grinds their teeth, we call it bruxism. It is a condition, not a disease, where most people grind their teeth unconsciously, leading to gradual loss of tooth enamel," says Dr Srinivas Sivashankaran, orthodontist, Prashanth Hospitals, Chennai.

Bruxism is rare in children, occurs occasionally in teenagers, and is most common in adults. "People under stress respond by tightening the muscles of the face and jaws and clenching the teeth, which gives them a sense of security," says Dr Sivashankaran.

Over time, daytime clenching leads to unconscious nighttime grinding. "It causes excessive

teeth wear, sensitivity, jaw stiffness, soreness on waking up, mild facial muscle fatigue, or frequent morning headaches," says Dr Sivashankaran.

In many cases, the person sleeping next to them notices the grinding sounds at night. The solution: a soft splint can help manage the habit, he says.

## LIFE'S DENTAL IMPRINTS

Aryan is seven now, thumb-free, his bite back on track.

Not every story ends as cleanly. Some leave behind cracked teeth, worn enamel or gums bearing the marks of years of neglect. But together they are proof of the same truth: attention paid early enough matters.

A thumb sucked for comfort, a missed cleaning, a jaw tightened—none of this feels urgent in the moment. That is precisely why they are worth catching before the mouth begins to display the signs of the years.