

ORTHODONTICS:

A GUIDE TO ALIGNERS, BRACES, RETAINERS, AND SPACE MAINTAINERS

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If there's one thing that can dramatically improve your appearance, health and even your psyche, it would be orthodontics. Most people who undergo treatment are very happy with their improved appearance and increased self-confidence

Aligners, Braces, Retainers and Space Maintainers: A Glossary

Orthodontics involves different treatments and procedures, depending on the problem(s). The recommendation may include one of the following types of oral appliances:

Aligners: Aligners are made of a clear plastic or acrylic material and are custom-shaped to your teeth. A series of aligners progressively move teeth toward their desired positions. The aligners must be removed to eat, brush and floss. Because they are removable, patients must be sure to follow their orthodontist's instructions for daily wear.

Braces: Braces generally have two components: brackets, made of metal or tooth-coloured ceramic, and wires, which are threaded through slots in the brackets and do the actual work of moving the teeth. An orthodontist must place the brace in the right spot on the tooth, and they also need to adjust the wires at regular intervals.

Retainers: These appliances "retain" teeth in their corrected or straightened position. This is done most often after a period of orthodontic treatment, and the retainer can be either removable or fixed (retaining wire) in place with orthodontic cement. Retainers preserve and stabilize the results of orthodontic treatment and must be worn as prescribed.

Space maintainers: A space maintainer (either a removable appliance or attached into position as a "fixed" appliance) holds certain teeth in position, while waiting for further development of the bite. They are often used when a primary or baby tooth has been lost prematurely, due to accident or decay, to hold the space until the permanent tooth comes in.

Why do I need braces?

Most recommendations for orthodontic care involve a combination of improved function or improved esthetics, says Dr. Ian McConnachie, an Ontario Dental Association (ODA) Past-President and a pediatric dentist in Ottawa. Problems with function can result in further damage to teeth, gums or bone supporting the teeth, or can result in problems related to the jaw, he explains. And problems with esthetics may arise from teeth that are crowded and overlapping, or teeth with spacing between them.

Am I too old to wear braces?

There is no age limit to wearing braces, and many adults are also choosing to benefit from orthodontic treatment. In fact, approximately 25 per cent of all patients with braces are 18 years of age and older. "A lot of adults say they've always wanted this done, but their parents couldn't afford it," says ODA Past-President Dr. LouAnn Visconti, an ODA Past-President and an orthodontist in Timmins, Ont.

"Anything that makes your teeth look better is in high demand right now," says Dr. Visconti. "Everybody wants the perfect smile, no matter what age they are."

There are also more options for orthodontic treatment that fit into the adult lifestyle, such as aligners to straighten teeth versus conventional braces. Braces have also become more esthetically pleasing – smaller, less obvious (or more fashionably flamboyant for the younger set) and more comfortable.



What is the difference between braces and an aligner?

A clear aligner is similar to a thin sports mouthguard. You wear each set of aligners for approximately two weeks before changing to the next aligner. Each aligner gradually moves the teeth to the corrected position. An aligner is completely removable at any time, allowing the wearer to eat, and brush and floss their teeth without it. There are no dietary restrictions with an aligner and no additional brushing and flossing techniques that have to be learned, as when wearing conventional braces.

Many adults are choosing aligners over conventional braces to straighten their teeth and create a good fit of the teeth. When Rose Zisko, ODA's Student Services Associate, decided to get braces in her 40s, she opted for aligners. "I didn't want to wear metal," says Zisko. "I was very pleased with the outcome. I only had to wear the aligners for seven months – the movement was fast. The price was very reasonable; aligners today are more affordable than ever," she says.

Clear aligners are also available for teens who prefer to wear invisible, rather than colourful, braces. But aligners are not for everyone. Some problems with the bite/alignment of the teeth are beyond the capabilities of aligners. The alternative to aligners is conventional braces, which can be composed of stainless steel (metal braces) or of a tooth-coloured material (clear braces). Braces are glued or bonded to the tooth surface, and a wire fits into the slot on the brace. The brace and wire are held together by small coloured elastic ties, wire ties or by a latch that is part of the brace itself. It is the wire that straightens the teeth.

Straight teeth are healthy teeth

Straightening your teeth, no matter what your age, is about more than just an attractive smile. "There are all sorts of oral-health issues, as well as cosmetic issues, associated with teeth that aren't straight," says Dr. McConnachie. Simply put, straight teeth function better, stay healthier and are easier to clean. And a beautiful smile increases your confidence and self-esteem.

"Kids are less reluctant to get braces now because so many of their friends have them, too," says Dr. Visconti, who has been practising orthodontics for more than 27 years. "I've actually had kids cry in the [dental] chair when I told them they weren't ready for braces because they still had their baby teeth," she laughs.

The sooner the better

Many orthodontic problems are easier to correct if detected early, and early treatment may mean your child can avoid surgery or more serious corrections later in life. Kids who were thumb-suckers or used a soother for an extended period of time may require early treatment to correct a cross-bite, for example, says Dr. McConnachie. The average age for getting braces, however, is 11 or 12 years old, when a child's adult teeth have all come in.

What's new compared to 20 years ago?

Braces are much smaller now, and many no longer require metal ties or coloured rings to hold the wire in the brace. And the wires are much more flexible with lighter force levels, which all add up to greater patient comfort.



One of the latest innovations is the use of laser-scanning technology, which avoids the need for dental impressions. These scans are used in the production of aligners, in the placement of braces and to make different appliances that can be used to stop habits, such as thumb-sucking, or for making appliances that will hold space for adult teeth when baby teeth have been lost too early.

If I'm seeing an orthodontist, I don't need to see a dentist, right?

Wrong! All orthodontic patients need to see their dentist on a regular basis for tooth cleanings and routine checkups.

My son took his retainer out, then forgot about it and stepped on it. Do I need to replace it?

Yes. Retention is a lifelong process. That is a change in recommendation as a result of newer science on this issue, says Dr. McConnachie. Why? As with the rest of the body, the mouth and the bite change with age. If you wear the retainer, the teeth won't shift – it's that simple. The bottom line for broken or lost retainers is that new ones are needed. 

According to the Ontario Association of Orthodontists (OAO),

the goal of orthodontic treatment is a good bite – meaning straight teeth that mesh well with the teeth in the opposite jaw. A good bite makes it easier for you to swallow, bite, chew and speak. A healthy smile and good dental health will lead to good overall physical and mental health.

What is an orthodontist?

An orthodontist is a highly trained specialist who has not only graduated as a dentist, but has also returned to university for post-graduate studies. Your orthodontist will work one-on-one with you and your dentist to provide you with the best treatment plan to suit your needs.

Learn more on the OAO website at <https://www.oao.on.ca/>



Where can I find more information?

Patients should only start treatment after a thorough assessment of the benefits and risks – and a thorough discussion with their dentist and their orthodontist.