

Braces and Orthodontics

People with crowded or crooked teeth are said to have a “bad bite.” Even when the teeth look straight, the upper and lower teeth may not fit together properly. This could happen when the lower jaw and teeth are either too far forward or too far back to fit the upper teeth.

Crooked teeth and bite problems are often solved with orthodontic treatment. Braces are the most common way to correct crooked teeth and major bite problems. For less severe cases, there are other types of orthodontic treatment.

The good news is that orthodontic treatment can lead to a healthy, beautiful smile at all ages, especially with early treatment. And although orthodontic treatment takes time and patience, the end result is worth it.

Problems with crooked teeth

There are different causes of a bad bite, or malocclusion (mal-oh-CLUE-shun). Protruding, crowded, or irregularly spaced teeth and jaw problems might be inherited. Thumb-sucking, losing teeth prematurely, or accidents also can be a cause.

Orthodontic treatment can create a nice-looking smile and give you extra confidence. But more importantly, it results in a healthier mouth. Malocclusion can cause these problems if not treated:

- **Crooked and crowded teeth are harder to keep clean.** This can lead to tooth decay, gum disease, and tooth loss.
- **When teeth are in the wrong place, they also can keep the jaws from developing properly.** An uneven bite can interfere with chewing and speaking, can cause abnormal wear to tooth enamel, and can lead to problems with the jaws.

Types of orthodontic treatment

There are different types of orthodontic treatment that can be used to correct a bad bite. Your bite is a complex system. Your teeth, jaws, gums, and facial muscles work together to help you chew, speak, and smile. To get your bite in line, a few different steps may be needed. Your dentist or orthodontist will discuss which type of treatment is best for you.

Braces

Braces move teeth by applying pressure. The braces usually consist of small brackets cemented to your teeth, connected by a wire or rubber bands. The wire is regularly tightened by the dentist or orthodontist to gradually shift your teeth and jaw. The brackets may be metal or tooth colored. Sometimes brackets are placed on the backs of your teeth to make them less visible.

Aligners

Aligners are made of clear plastic or acrylic material and are worn over your teeth to straighten them. Each set of custom-made aligners is worn for a few weeks or maybe a month. Then you get a new set for the next stage of your treatment. This way, your teeth are gradually moved into the correct position according to your treatment plan.

Aligners are removable and need to be taken out before you eat, brush, and floss. Because they are removable, you must be sure to follow your dentist's instructions on how long to wear them each day.

Surgical correction

Some patients may have an upper or lower jaw that sticks out and causes their bite to be uneven. In some cases, surgery may be needed to improve the function and appearance of their bites.

Orthodontic treatment for children

Most adult teeth erupt between the ages of 6 and 12. When a child's first permanent molars are present, the dentist will check to see how they work together. This is called a "bite check." If the child's teeth or bite need treatment, it's best to get an early start. Treatment that begins while a child is growing helps produce the best results. Most treatment begins when patients are between 8 and 14.

The dentist will select the type of appliance based on the patient's age and treatment needs, as well as how well he or she will be able to follow care and oral hygiene instructions. Braces are available for patients of all ages. Aligners are available for teens and adults.



Before orthodontic treatment



After treatment

Orthodontic treatment for adults

Adults can benefit from orthodontics, too. Many seek treatment to correct long-time problems or to

correct changes that happened over time. The basic process involved in moving teeth is the same at all ages. Usually an adult's treatment takes a little longer than a child's treatment.

No matter your age, it's never too late to improve your dental health and beautify your smile.

Who can provide orthodontic treatment?

Most dentists are trained to treat some orthodontic problems. If your dentist thinks you or your child should see a specialist for treatment, he or she will refer you to an orthodontist. An orthodontist is a dentist who specializes in the diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of dental and facial problems. The purpose of orthodontics is to treat malocclusion by using braces, aligners, or corrective surgical procedures to straighten teeth and correct jaw alignment.

What to expect

Most people wear braces or aligners for one to three years, depending on what conditions need correcting. They then wear retainers that hold the teeth in their new positions. Your dentist will let you know how long you should wear your retainer.

Although a little discomfort is expected during treatment, today's braces are more comfortable than in the past. Newer materials apply a constant, gentle force to move teeth and usually require fewer adjustments.

Do's and don'ts of braces

Do:

- Keep your teeth clean when wearing braces. Brushing and flossing remove plaque, a sticky film of bacteria that forms on teeth. If plaque is not removed regularly it could lead to tooth decay or gum disease.
- Replace your toothbrush every three months, or sooner if the bristles are frayed. Worn toothbrushes won't clean teeth properly.
- Go to all of your orthodontic appointments. If you delay any adjustments, your treatment will just take longer.
- Keep visiting your regular dentist for cleanings and exams. Your dentist checks your teeth for loss of minerals in the enamel (called demineralization) and decay. He or she also looks for gum disease and changes in the oral tissues.

Don't:

- Eat foods that could get stuck in your braces or bend the wires. These foods include nuts, corn on the cob, popcorn, hard candy, ice, and sticky foods like chewing gum, caramel, or other chewy candy.

Ask your dentist about which foods to avoid.

- Eat too many sugary foods. This can lead to tooth decay around the brackets that could permanently stain or damage your teeth.
- Play sports and active games without wearing a mouthguard. A guard can protect your mouth and jaw from getting hurt. Your dentist can suggest a proper mouthguard to wear with your braces.

Before-and-after photos courtesy of Dr. Grant Bowbeer.

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