

Braces

Straighter teeth can improve oral health

There are many reasons why a dentist may recommend orthodontic treatment. It is used to correct a malocclusion (bad bite), a condition caused by crowded, crooked or protruding teeth; teeth that are out of alignment; or jaws that do not meet properly. Malocclusion may be inherited, or it may be the result of thumb sucking, the premature loss of teeth or an accident.

Correcting the problem can result in better oral health because crooked and crowded teeth can make daily oral hygiene difficult. Over time, this may lead to caries (tooth decay), gingival (gum) disease and possibly tooth loss. An improper bite can interfere with chewing and speaking, cause abnormal wear to tooth enamel and lead to problems with the jaws.

TODAY'S BRACES

Orthodontic treatment often is more comfortable and takes less time than it did years ago. Braces (also called "orthodontic appliances") can be as inconspicuous—or as noticeable—as the patient desires. Brackets (the part of the braces that attach to each tooth) are smaller. Some brackets are attached to the back of the teeth, making them less noticeable.

Brackets are made of metal, ceramic, plastic or a combination of these materials. Some brackets are clear or tooth-colored. For those who want to show off their braces, there are brackets shaped like hearts and footballs, and elastics (orthodontic rubber bands) are available in school colors and holiday hues such as red, white and blue. There are gold-plated braces and glow-in-the-dark retainers.

Two types of braces are available: fixed, which are worn all of the time and can be removed only by the dentist, and removable, which the patient

can take out of his or her mouth. The dentist selects the type based on the patient's treatment needs and how well he or she will follow instructions regarding care and oral hygiene.

WHAT TO EXPECT, WHAT TO AVOID

Although treatment plans are customized for each patient, most people wear their braces for one to three years depending on the conditions that need correcting. This is followed by a period of wearing a retainer that holds the teeth in their new positions. Although a little discomfort is expected during treatment, today's braces are more comfortable than ever before. Newer materials apply a constant, gentle force to move teeth and usually require fewer adjustments.

Good oral hygiene is especially important for people wearing braces. Brushing regularly, as directed by the dentist, flossing daily and scheduling dental visits can help keep teeth healthy.

Brushing and flossing remove plaque, a sticky film of bacteria that forms on teeth. If plaque is not removed regularly, it can lead to caries. Patients with braces should maintain a balanced diet and limit between-meal snacks. Your dentist may recommend avoiding certain foods that could interfere with braces or accidentally bend the wires. These foods may include nuts, popcorn, hard candy, ice and sticky foods like chewing gum, caramel or other chewy candy.

Orthodontic treatment time generally is an estimate that varies from patient to patient. The dentist has specific treatment goals in mind, and treatment typically continues until the goals are achieved. The result will be worth the wait. ■

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