

# Oral Health Tips

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## The Basics on Braces

Few people have perfectly aligned teeth. Orthodontics is the area of dentistry that focuses on the diagnosis and treatment of irregularly aligned teeth, and related jaw and facial structures. Orthodontic treatment typically uses removable or fixed appliances and may involve brackets, bands, wires and/or elastics to provide the necessary movement of your teeth. These appliances are commonly referred to as “braces.”

### Why do teeth need braces?

Occlusion refers to the alignment of teeth and the way that the upper and lower teeth fit together (bite). An orthodontic problem is referred to as a malocclusion, meaning a “bad bite” when the teeth are not properly aligned. Malocclusions can either be inherited or acquired. Inherited malocclusions include crowded teeth, large gaps between teeth and extra or missing teeth. Acquired orthodontic problems can result from repetitive behaviors such as thumb or pacifier sucking, an accident, and premature loss or prolonged retention of teeth.

The benefits to treating moderate to severe malocclusion may include:

- easier cleaning of teeth
- less risk of tooth decay and periodontal diseases
- eliminates strain on the teeth, jaws and muscles, which lessens the risk of breaking a tooth and reduces symptoms of TMJ

### When should braces be applied?

If needed, orthodontic treatment can be provided at almost any age and can benefit both children and adults. Healthy teeth can be moved at almost any point in a person’s life; although some orthodontic problems are easier to correct at a younger age. Individuals should discuss with their dentist if orthodontic treatment would be advisable for them or their child.

Correcting an orthodontic problem can take a few months to several years. Generally, orthodontic treatment length is based on the complexity and severity of the problem, and will vary from person to person. Treatment length will also depend on the patient’s age, commitment and cooperation in the process.

### How does orthodontic treatment work?

Orthodontic appliances or braces apply a gentle amount of force in a specific direction to move teeth to a new position over a period of time. Generally, braces are custom-made to meet the needs of the patient and treat specific problems.

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### **Do braces hurt?**

Most individuals undergoing orthodontic treatment for the first time can expect to experience some mild discomfort, such as sore teeth or sensitivity to biting pressure for a few days. This is also common when periodic adjustments occur during treatment. Overall, orthodontic discomfort is easily managed.

### **Are there less noticeable braces?**

Today's braces are more functional, aesthetically pleasing and less noticeable than those used in the past. Modern brackets are made out of metal, ceramic or plastic and can either be clear or colored. Additionally, the front teeth typically have the bracket bonded directly to the tooth as opposed to older braces, which included more cumbersome metal bands with brackets placed around each tooth.

Follow up and routine oral health care is very important. Plaque can accumulate on braces and if not properly cared for may permanently mark teeth or cause tooth decay. Make sure to have a good daily routine of brushing and flossing and include regular visits to a dentist.

**Sources:** American Dental Association: [www.ada.org](http://www.ada.org);  
American Association of Orthodontists:  
[www.braces.org](http://www.braces.org)