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What You Need to Know About Braces



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For many kids (and for some adults, too!), braces are a fact of life. Dental braces are used for so many purposes but mainly to straighten crooked teeth.

Having straight teeth is important. Crooked, out of place, or misaligned teeth can affect the way you chew, talk, or smile. What's more, because they have unnatural spaces, crooked teeth are harder to clean and are therefore more likely to have cavities. Sometimes, the teeth are so crooked that it can even affect the way the jaws line up, causing great pain and discomfort.

This condition is more commonly referred to as "malocclusion", which means "bad bite." Other examples of malocclusion are crowded teeth, extra teeth, missing teeth or jaws that are out of alignment.

Malocclusion is a hereditary condition. There are some cases, however, where the condition can be acquired, in which case, the malocclusion is often brought about by accidents, early or late loss of baby teeth, or sucking of the thumb or fingers for a prolonged period of time.

When left unchecked, the malocclusion can cause some permanent deformity around the bone structure of the mouth. Add to that the fact that the condition can cause some discomfort and pain and you can see how braces can benefit those people with malocclusion.

What is Orthodontics?

Orthodontics is the science of using devices to move teeth and align jaws. It is a special discipline of dentistry concerned with improving one's smile and oral health.

An orthodontist, therefore, is someone who specializes in treating problems like crooked or crowded teeth, overbites or underbites, incorrect jaw position and disorders of the jaw joints with the use of devices, such as dental braces.

Why get braces?

There is a certain amount of social stigma placed on people wearing braces. Even though the thing is largely for a healthful purpose, it does not seem to dissuade people from noticing that a person with braces is different from a person with none.

Also, the wearing of braces can be highly inconvenient and downright painful. It would require a major change in your lifestyle, especially your diet and eating habits. You may be required to wear it for a maximum number of years, during which time you will have to suffer the ridicule of a few narrow-minded people and the pain of having these metal braces pressing against your mouth.

However, before you get discouraged by doomsday thoughts on how your social life will most positively end in the most spectacularly metallic way possible, think about what benefits you will gain after a few years of not-quite as horrendous as you think experience of wearing braces.

Because the thing is, most people have nothing but misconceptions about dental braces.

So allow us to show you the real side of the story.

When is the right time for braces?

Teeth can be moved at any age. However, if you want “ideal” results, it is best to start early. Usually, the younger you are the better the results and the easier time you will have.

The reason given is that in children both the bone around the teeth (called the “alveolar process”) and the jaw bones can be molded by braces as the child grows. But if you got your braces as an adult, the device can no longer mold the jaw bones. For that, you would have to undergo surgery.

Orthodontists often recommend the ages of 3-12 as the ideal age to start undergoing orthodontic treatments. In a child’s case, the orthodontist’s function is two-fold: to create straight well-aligned teeth and to improve the facial profile. In adults, orthodontists can only correct the former, with the latter case (facial profile) remaining stable throughout adolescence and adulthood.

In addition, braces in adults are made more difficult by the fact that you may have to wear retainers at night for the rest of your life, or risk having to undergo treatment again. Retainers will help maintain the results of the treatment.

Does it have to be so *metallic* though?

There are many types of braces used. Orthodontists may recommend a specific type that would be best for your particular problem. In any case, you have a choice out of three varieties:

- Plastic

- Metal
- Ceramic

Recent advances in techniques and orthodontic technology have also spawned some new types of braces that answer the problem of conspicuousness and discomfort. Now, braces are smaller and have contours that are more comfortable for the tissues in your mouth.

The steely, metallic types are still the most common types of orthodontic braces around. By their very nature, these braces are durable and there is less of a chance that some parts of them would accidentally break off.

However, if you are bothered by how your mouth looks while wearing these types of metallic braces, you can ask your orthodontist to fix you ceramic braces or plastic braces. These are usually “tooth-colored” so they are far less noticeable.

But these braces are often high-end and may cost more, so you would have to shell out some funds first before getting one set.

Another option you have is the “lingual type.” These are brackets that attach to the back of your teeth, so they are hidden from view. Again, these types of cosmetic braces may be more expensive than your old, regular, run-of-the mill metal bands.

How long before you can take them off?

Well, this would depend on the type of orthodontic treatment plan you have. Some plans are more complicated than others. Other factors that could affect how long you would have to wear the braces are the type of problem you have and your age.

Usually, the more complicated your spacing or bite problem is, the longer the period of treatment. Likewise if you are older, the treatment plan may take longer, too.

On the average, patients can count on wearing full braces between 18 and 30 months. After that, for at least a few months, you may have to wear retainers to set and align tissues surrounding the straightened teeth.

Will treatment be uncomfortable?

There will be some discomfort involved. Each time you visit your orthodontist, he would tighten the interconnecting wires. This would cause additional mild

pressure from the brackets or bands in order to shift teeth or jaws gradually into the desired position.

Your teeth and jaws will probably feel sore after each visit. However, the discomfort is only brief and will disappear after a while.

What you should be concerned about is the fact that some teeth may be extracted to make room for teeth being shifted with braces and for proper jaw alignment. But the procedure for this is painless.

Would it mean a complete lifestyle change for you?

Of course not! It's just braces. It's not like you're suddenly moving to Timbuktu and dropping everything you have going. But you do have to change some of your personal habits and avoid certain types of foods.

Cut down on sweets, chips and pop. Sugary and starchy foods like these can generate a lot of acid and plaque in the mouth. High acidity and plaque can, in turn, cause tooth decay and promote gum disease.

Eat "healthy" foods instead. Basically, a well-balanced diet is a safe bet. However, be sure to cut hard foods like carrots or apples into smaller pieces before eating them.

Avoid sticky, chewy sweets like caramel. This kind of foods has a bad tendency to stick to your braces, causing wire damage and loosening of the brackets.

Also, avoid hard and crunchy snacks like popcorn, nuts, and hard candy. These things have the potential to break braces and may even cause *you* to swallow some portion of your braces. While swallowed portions of braces are typically harmless and have no trouble of making their way to the exit, it is still not a very desirable experience to go through.

And lastly, whatever you do, do NOT do any of the following:

- Ice cube chewing
- Thumb sucking
- Excessive mouth breathing
- Lip biting
- Pushing your tongue against your teeth

Oral hygiene?

Is still as important as ever, if not even more so. Braces have tiny spaces where food particles and plaque can get trapped. After every meal, brush your teeth carefully using fluoride toothpaste and a soft-bristled toothbrush. Pay closer attention to the portions where the wires stick to your teeth as these are the likeliest places that food particles end up stuck.

After brushing, rinse thoroughly. Check your teeth in the mirror to make sure that they are clean.

Don't forget to floss. And floss not just between teeth but also between braces and underwires. This might require a bit of finger dexterity on your part. To make easier, use a floss threader.

In addition to your daily routine, it is also recommended that you have your teeth cleaned every six months. This is so that your teeth and gums remain healthy and strong. Insufficient cleaning while wearing braces can cause enamel staining around the brackets or bands.

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