



A fixed retainer in place

Retention is ongoing

After orthodontic treatment, for most teenage patients it takes between one and two years to gain stability of the alignment of their teeth, while for adults it takes longer. However, everyone's teeth continue to move throughout life.

If you are a teenager, you may expect that active growth still changes your face and jaws until the time that you normally get your wisdom teeth. Without retention, those changes can move your teeth. Therefore the best way to preserve the results of your orthodontic treatment and your beautiful smile is to continue retention at least until you have stopped growing, either by wearing your removable retainers several nights a week or by wearing fixed retainers.

Even after active growth has ceased, our faces and jaws continue to change slowly as we age. As these changes also cause movement of the teeth throughout life, you may benefit from continuing retention for a long time to keep your teeth in their best positions. Your orthodontist will therefore provide you with the opportunity to continue retention for as long as you wish.

Oral health throughout your life

A prime function of your dentist's and orthodontist's care is the maintenance of your oral health.

Research has shown that people who have received orthodontic treatment generally have better oral health throughout life. This may be due to the better positions of their teeth, the encouragement to maintain good oral health received during orthodontic treatment, or both. Research has also shown that people with good oral hygiene suffer less heart disease, fewer strokes, less respiratory disease and fewer complications during pregnancy and childbirth.

It is therefore important that you continue to see your dentist for regular check ups and preventive care to maintain optimum dental health both during and after orthodontic treatment.



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Orthodontic retention

Retention is a very important part of your orthodontic treatment and almost all patients need a period of orthodontic retention after braces or aligners.

The length of time and type of retention depend on many factors that are different for each patient. Your orthodontist will explain to you what kind of retention you are likely to need and for how long.

Retention is essential

To give you a beautiful smile with a good bite and straight teeth, orthodontic appliances move your teeth into new positions. When you are young, orthodontic treatment may also improve the shape and alignment of your jaws.

Moving your teeth stretches the elastic tissues that hold them. Once your braces are off, these tissues try to pull your teeth back towards their old positions. Retainers reduce or stop that movement and give the tissues time to change and adjust to your teeth's new positions. For that reason, retention is an essential part of your overall orthodontic treatment.

Interrupting retention allows your teeth to move back towards their old positions, called relapse. If relapse is serious enough, it may require re-treatment with braces or aligners. It is therefore important that you maintain your retention in the way and for the duration that your orthodontist recommends.

After removing your braces, your orthodontist will supervise your retention for a number of years. After that, you may continue retention with supervision from your dentist at your regular visits that are essential for dental health checks and preventive care.

Retainers

Orthodontists use both removable and fixed retainers, depending on the patient and their circumstances. Your orthodontist will discuss which form of retention is most suitable for you.

Removable retainers – sometimes called plates – are made of plastic or of metal wire and plastic. You wear them over your teeth and you can take them out yourself. Fixed retainers, which you cannot remove, consist of flexible wire bonded to the back of your teeth to retain them in position.

Removable retainers

Usually you need to wear removable retainers full-time at first and then wear them part-time. You can take them out when eating, during active or contact sports and when cleaning your teeth and retainer. They can and do break and you can lose them. If this happens, you need to arrange a replacement with your orthodontist as quickly as possible.

Patients who do not wear their removable retainers regularly as recommended, or stop wearing them altogether before the end of the optimum retention period, will very likely suffer relapse. Your orthodontist is therefore happy to remake your retainers when necessary, and to support and motivate you to maintain retention.



Above: Two types of removable retainers

Fixed retainers

You cannot lose fixed retainers or forget to wear them and they break less easily than a removable retainer. These advantages have increased their popularity and use. However, as they are bonded to the back your teeth, they have the potential to give rise to gum disease in the long term. It is therefore essential that you take good care in cleaning your teeth, particularly around the retainers.

Fixed retainers require checking and maintenance and the most common maintenance is to reglue a tooth to the wire after a bond has failed. As soon as you notice that a tooth is moving or that a bond or a wire has broken, you need to call your orthodontist or dentist for repair. If a tooth moves excessively, you may require further active orthodontic treatment.