

## Teeth - orthodontics

Orthodontics is an area of dentistry that corrects teeth and jaw alignment problems using devices such as braces, plates, head gear and rubber bands. Problems with teeth alignment can cause tooth decay, gum disease and damage to the jaw joints.

Generally, problems can be detected by the age of nine and treated by the start of the teen years once the permanent (secondary) teeth have replaced baby (primary) teeth. Early intervention and treatment is preferred since the process is usually quicker and easier.

### Crooked, crowded and overlapping teeth

Crooked, crowded and overlapping teeth can cause a range of oral health problems, including:

- **Dental caries and gum disease** – misaligned teeth are hard to clean, particularly if they overlap. A build-up of plaque can cause tooth decay and gum disease.
- **Injury to the gum** – instead of meeting with its partner in the opposing jaw, a misaligned tooth may sink into the nearby gum and cause injury.
- **Wear and tear** – the teeth of the upper and lower jaw are designed to fit neatly together. If they are misaligned, the action of chewing may grind the teeth unevenly.
- **Jaw injury** – misaligned teeth may place extra stress and strain on the jaw joints. This can cause localised pain, headaches and sometimes unusual clicking or grinding noises when the jaw opens and closes.
- **Speech impediments** – many sounds are made with the tongue against or near the teeth. Misaligned teeth or jaws can interfere with speech. For instance, a person with a particular type of bad bite may pronounce 's' and 'z' sounds like 'th'.
- **Self-confidence** – a person with misaligned teeth may feel self-conscious and be reluctant to smile.

### Diagnosing misaligned teeth and jaw

Problems with teeth and jaw alignment are identified using a number of tests, including:

- Photographs
- X-rays of the mouth
- Plaster impressions of the upper and lower jaws.

### Corrective orthodontic devices

The range of corrective orthodontic devices includes:

- **Braces** – tiny brackets are attached to the front of each tooth, and wires are threaded through. The gentle and consistent pressure of the braces slowly moves and correctly repositions the teeth. The braces generally need to be adjusted by the orthodontist every month or two. Braces can be stainless steel, gold, silver, coloured or clear. In some cases, the braces can be fitted to the backs of the teeth where they can't be seen.
- **Headgear** – if the teeth need extra pressure, headgear may be required. Head gear may be worn to hold teeth front teeth in position while closing gaps or used to apply force to create space. Headgear is usually worn at night.
- **Rubber bands** – bands may be used, looped from one tooth to another for additional force.

### Risks of orthodontic treatment

Some of the risks include:

- **Dental hygiene problems** – braces and wires make cleaning the teeth more difficult. This may cause decay, discolouration and permanent marks.
- **Soft tissue injury** – the braces may dig into the gums or cheeks.
- **Relapse** – the corrected teeth may misalign themselves again once the braces are removed. This is the main reason for suggesting that retainer plates be worn after braces have been removed.

## Financial assistance

Some young people and adults are also eligible for public oral health services. Young people and adults are eligible for public oral health services if they:

- Have a Health Care Card or are a dependant of a card holder, or receive Youth Allowance or Education Maintenance Allowance
- Are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- Are a newly arrived refugee or asylum seeker
- Are enrolled in special or special development schools
- Are in residential care provided by the Children, Youth and Families Division of the Department of Human Services.
- All children from birth until the start of secondary school are eligible for public oral health services. Children receive general oral health advice as well as dental check-ups and treatment.

## Where to get help

- Your oral health professional (particularly a dentist or orthodontist)
- Your public oral health service. To find your closest service Tel. 1300 360 054
- The Royal Dental Hospital of Melbourne clinic Tel. (03) 9341 1000 or 1800 833 039 (from rural Victoria), 8.30am to 5.00pm Monday to Friday
- For emergencies contact your public oral health service or the Royal Dental Hospital emergency service Tel. (03) 9341 1000 or 1800 833 039 (from rural Victoria), 8.30am to 9.15pm Monday to Friday and 9.00am to 9.15pm on weekends and public holidays.

## Things to remember

- Misaligned teeth can cause a variety of problems, including decay and gum disease, damage to jaw joints and speech difficulties.
- Orthodontics is a type of dentistry that corrects teeth and jaw alignment problems.
- The range of corrective devices includes braces, rubber bands and headgear.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Dental Health Services Victoria

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