

WHAT IS ORTHODONTICS?

Orthodontics is the branch of dentistry concerned with the growth of the teeth, jaws and face, and is in high demand. Why is this? Orthodontic treatment is about making the best of your teeth; it's about improving the harmony of your mouth and jaws. Once you can bite together correctly, you can eat more comfortably and care for your teeth and gums more easily. And your smile will benefit too!

Getting started

Most courses of orthodontic treatment begin with a referral from a general dentist to a specialist orthodontist. Depending on what treatment is needed, most patients are seen by a specialist in a local practice or by a consultant in hospital. Some patients are treated by dentists with extra training and experience to treat the milder cases.

Below are some of the most common reasons for a referral:

- Protruding upper front teeth - one of the most common dental problems
- Crowding – a narrow jaw may mean there is not enough room for your teeth, resulting in crowding. Conversely, some patients have significant gaps between their teeth.
- Asymmetry – particularly when the centre lines of the upper and lower front teeth do not match, perhaps because the teeth have drifted or the position of the jaw has shifted.
- A deep bite – when your upper teeth cover the lower teeth too much.
- A reverse bite – when your upper teeth bite inside the lower teeth.
- An open bite – when your front teeth remain apart when your back teeth meet; the tongue is often still visible between the upper and lower front teeth.
- Impacted teeth - in some patients, secondary teeth come through in the wrong position or do not erupt at all. Orthodontic treatment can help bring these teeth into the correct position.

Getting Treatment

Every patient needs tailor-made treatment that is planned by the orthodontist and agreed with the patient. In order to decide what treatment is required for you your orthodontist will need to carry out a full assessment of your teeth which is likely to include x-rays, impressions (moulds of your teeth) and photographs. Treatment, on average, can take between 12-18 months, however, in some cases more than two years. Braces are almost always needed and the most commonly used ones are listed below:

A fixed brace

This is the most common type of brace today, often known as "train tracks". Brackets are glued onto the teeth and linked by wires. Small elastic hoops are often used to hold the wire in position. The wires exert gentle pressure to move the teeth into a new position. The brackets can be metal, ceramic or even gold and the elastic hoops come in many colours (not all brackets are available for NHS treatment).

A removable brace

This is sometimes used for correcting a simple problem, such as moving a single tooth or expanding the dental arch. It has a plastic plate with wires and springs attached. Removable braces need to be worn all the time except for cleaning, swimming or contact sports.

Functional appliances

These are used to harness the growth of the jaws and improve way the upper and lower teeth meet. There are several designs all of which fit on to both the upper and lower teeth and hold the lower jaw forward. They are mostly removable but should be worn all the time except for cleaning, swimming and contact sports.

Retainers

At the end of treatment all patients should wear retainers to hold their teeth in the new position. These can be removable or fixed and are an important part of treatment.