

Patient Page

Guide to orthodontics

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What is orthodontics?

Orthodontics is the dental specialty that corrects the position of teeth. *Ortho* means 'straight' and *dontic* means 'tooth'.

An **orthodontist** is a dentist who specialises in orthodontics and has undergone 6 years of postgraduate training. Fixing misaligned teeth not only can improve your smile and facial appearance, but it can also improve general oral health and create better alignment and spacing of teeth when you bite down.

Benefits of orthodontic treatment

Benefits include:

- Better appearance
- Improved self-esteem
- Improved oral function

Principles of orthodontic treatment

Realignment of teeth may involve the following:

- X-ray examination
- Impressions made of the teeth
- Appliances such as braces; metal braces on the tongue-side of teeth and clear plastic positioners are available if patients do not want their braces to be too noticeable
- Removal (extraction) and reshaping of teeth
- Surgery may be needed to correct jaw shape

Patients need to clean teeth and appliances properly, visit their orthodontist regularly, and avoid eating certain foods. Treatment can typically last 1 to 3 years, depending on the severity of the correction.

Sometimes, orthodontic treatment is needed before patients can have other dental procedures done, like fitting dentures or implants. Similarly, conditions like gum disease need to be treated before, during, or after orthodontic treatment.

Do I need orthodontic treatment?

Signs of orthodontic disorders can include:

- Visibly misaligned or crooked teeth, or gaps
- Deviation in facial appearance
- Difficulty or discomfort when eating

Inherited causes include improper jaw growth; non-inherited causes include tooth loss, injury, and habits. Orthodontic treatment can be provided at any age from 7 years to 70+ years. If you think you or your child needs orthodontic treatment, please arrange a consultation with an orthodontic specialist.

Sources: MedlinePlus, Hong Kong Society of Orthodontists. For more information, see <www.hkso.org>.

What does it mean?

Some commonly used orthodontic terms:

Fixed appliance	Braces cemented or bonded to teeth, especially for large corrections
Retainer	Removable appliance worn to maintain position of teeth (eg, after fixed-brace treatment)
Occlusion	Tooth alignment and spacing when you bite down; ideally, upper teeth fit slightly over lower teeth
Malocclusion	An irregular bite
Class I malocclusion	Bite is mostly normal, but teeth are crowded or crooked
Class II malocclusion, excessive overjet	Upper teeth overlap lower teeth more than normal
Class III malocclusion, negative overjet	Lower teeth go in front of the upper teeth
Open bite	Teeth do not come together
Deep bite	Upper teeth overlap lower teeth excessively
Crossbite	Reversed position of one or more teeth
Crowding	Lack of space
Diastema	Gap between teeth
Drift	Unwanted gradual movement of one or more teeth



A 42-year-old man before and after orthodontic treatment