

## Today's Braces Are Something To Smile About

New materials and technology mean that those who want straighter teeth no longer need to grin and bear it. According to the American Association of Orthodontists, more than 5.5 million Americans wear braces. Although about 80 percent of them are children and teens, more adults than ever are beautifying their smiles due to an expanding variety of appliances.

Braces work by putting pressure on the teeth, gradually moving them over time. The two main parts are brackets, which attach to the teeth, and a wire that applies most of the pressure. Conventional braces are made of shiny metal. Today, patients can choose translucent ceramic braces. This material is designed to blend in with the teeth, making the braces far less noticeable.

Beyond looks, one of the biggest innovations is self-ligating braces such as SmartClip™ and Clarity™ SL brands from 3M Unitek. Unlike traditional braces, these self-ligation (or friction-free) systems do not need elastic bands (ligatures) to attach the wire to the brackets. Elastic ligatures can slow down the teeth-moving process by causing friction or resistance, much like driving a car with the emergency brake on. Eliminating elastic ligatures can help the braces do their job faster.

Advances in braces fashion and function started to take off in the 1990s. Although consumers could opt for less-noticeable or better-performing braces, they couldn't have both. Only recently could aesthetics and more efficient treatment be found in a single appliance.

"Today, people don't have to compromise on looks or efficiency to straighten their teeth," says Dr. Anoop Sondhi, an Indianapolis orthodontist. "With Clarity SL braces, the ceramic brackets are more visually appealing than metal, and in my office, we've found that treatment usually takes just 14-18 months."

People typically wear conventional braces for 18-24 months, depending on the amount of work to be done and how well they follow the treatment plan.

In addition to faster overall treatment, self-ligating braces may also free up some of your valuable time during treatment. With no elastics to change, most visits are quicker and there are fewer appointments to fit in your busy schedule. According to orthodontist Dr. Gary Weinberger in Plainview, N.Y., "With the newer technology of self-ligation, I've found that the braces may need adjusting only every two or three months-substantially reducing the number of required appointments."

Another reason to consider self-ligating braces is a cleaner mouth. Cosmetically, the elastic bands used with conventional braces can discolor and stain, drawing unwanted attention to your mouth. On a more serious level, elastic bands can trap food and harbor bacteria, which promote tooth decay. They also make brushing more difficult, making clean braces, teeth and gums a challenge.

"Getting rid of the elastic ligatures is a huge plus for better oral hygiene," notes Dr. Patrice Pellerin, an orthodontist in Quebec, Canada. "Self-ligating braces help patients keep their braces and teeth cleaner than appliances that require elastic bands."

If you are considering braces for your child or yourself, this is an exciting time. There are more choices than ever, but many people may not realize there are many different types. Conventional braces are still a good option, but you may want to explore if newer types are right for you. Do some research to learn about what is available so you can discuss with your orthodontist the type of braces you want. Of course, treatment times and appointments will depend on the requirements of each orthodontic case.

By: Wendy Mitchell

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