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Adults and Children Benefit from Braces

It seems a little ironic that Orthodontic Health Month falls in October. For many children, the end of this month is surpassed only by Christmas as the time of the year to which they most look forward. Given the tradition of passing out free candy and other sweets for Halloween, it is probably safe to assume that dentists cringe when they consider the dental health of their young patients. But for both children and adults who wear braces, indulging in hard, sticky, or chewy candy often results in repair to orthodontic work. (Plain chocolate is okay if the teeth are brushed and flossed afterward, but bobbing for apples is not recommended when braces are worn.)

Today, according to the American Association of Orthodontists (AAO), over 4 million children and 1 million adults are under the care of an orthodontist in the United States and Canada. An orthodontist is a dentist who has continued his or her education to specialize in the “diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of dental and facial irregularities” in order to learn the proper methods of aligning and straightening teeth. The AAO notes that orthodontic treatment is a growing trend, with an increase of 135% in the number of patients seeking orthodontic treatment since 1982.

Orthodontists treat problems relating to malocclusion, which means “bad bite.” The majority of malocclusions are inherited, but some are the result of trauma, airway obstruction by tonsils and adenoids, dental disease, premature loss of baby or permanent teeth, and sucking on fingers, thumbs, or pacifiers. When the bite is not correct, a number of physical and mental health problems may result. When malocclusion occurs, it interferes with proper chewing, adversely affecting digestion and nutrition. Improperly aligned teeth are more difficult to clean, leading to tooth decay, cavities, and gum disease. When teeth are unsightly, the individual does not feel good about him or herself becoming self-conscious and inhibited in his or her social and work life.

Malocclusion can take a number of forms. Teeth may be crooked, overlapping, rotated, or twisted in the wrong direction. Some people have small mouths, so the teeth become crooked from crowding. When a person’s upper and lower jaw are not properly aligned, an overbite or an under bite result.

Orthodontists correct malocclusions by applying custom-made appliances, or braces, to the teeth. The braces are designed to address the particular problems of each individual. They may be made of metal, plastic, or ceramic, and even come in colors and glow in the dark versions. Sometimes, additional appliances may be used during part of the treatment period, which usually lasts between 6 and 24 months. However, braces may be required for longer periods, depending upon the complexity of the problem.

While children have been getting braces for some time, in the past 30 years, it has become increasingly common for adults to seek orthodontic treatment. People of any age can benefit from orthodontics, because healthy teeth can be moved at any time.

Braces are able to move the teeth into the proper position by exerting constant pressure on the teeth over time. Simply stated, the pressure loosens the tooth, allowing new bone to grow in to support the tooth in its new position. Brackets are fixed to the teeth with special glue, and then a wire connects the brackets. Every few weeks, the orthodontist adjusts the tension on the brackets, gradually increasing the pressure on each tooth until it moves into alignment.

Once the braces have completed their job and are removed, a custom- made retainer is provided with instructions on when and how long the retainer should be worn. The retainer is a necessary part of the process, because teeth usually continue to shift to varying degrees with time. Usually, the retainer is worn constantly for a number of months; then the orthodontist may recommend night-time use only for another period of time.

During the time braces are worn, regular visits to the dentist for check-ups and cleaning should continue, and frequent brushing and daily flossing will help ensure dental health so that orthodontia work will be completed on time. Cavities and gum disease that occur need to be treated, requiring the temporary removal of braces in order to resolve dental problems.

For further information about orthodontics, the American Association of Orthodontists offers an informative website, including a section on “Braces Friendly Halloween Recipes,” at www.braces.org (314-993-1700). Another helpful site, especially for young people, is www.kidshealth.org. Additional information about this or other public health concerns is available at the Central Connecticut Health District, www.ccthd.org (860-721-2822).