

"Smiling for life...."

Thank you, Dr. Gherman, for your insights into early treatment and the orthopedic stage of orthodontic treatment. Since we are fortunate to present this article jointly, I thought I would bookend your point by focusing on the END of treatment. In my practice, I see many adults who have seen their teeth relapse years after they completed orthodontic treatment. Whether these adults come with their children as patients, or to get treated themselves, I often hear the same story: "My orthodontist told me to wear my retainer for a year and I did so faithfully, but then I stopped wearing it and my teeth went back." This story is often followed up by two very legitimate questions.

1. Should I have been wearing my retainer my whole life?
2. What is the point of braces if the teeth are going to go back?

I believe that it is important for the patient to know what to expect from "life after braces" before they begin treatment.

First, a little biology lesson: Our gums are made from elastic tissue that has rebound potential like a rubber band. This is the cause of some of the relapse that we see after orthodontic treatment. There is actually a surgical procedure where your gums are peeled away and then sutured back together in order to minimize the relapse potential of the teeth. I would like to avoid being known as "The butcher of Bet Shemesh", so I would never send a patient for that procedure. Instead, we offer "retainers" for retention. This is the most common way to retain the beautiful smile that results from orthodontic treatment. In our office, we offer several different types of retainers. I would like to review the most common ones:

Permanent retention: I get many requests for this retainer. In this form of retention, a thin metal wire is bonded to the back of the teeth and is left there essentially forever. Many patients ask for this because it has the word "permanent" in it, which connotes never having to worry about the teeth moving again.

Permanent retainers do have some drawbacks in that they are harder to clean. Therefore I only recommend them to patients who are motivated brushers and flossers.



Essix retainer: This is a thin, clear, removable retainer that covers only the tooth surfaces. This is the retainer I would want, because it is very effective, and clear and comfortable, so it can be worn during the day if necessary. Some patients don't like it because it tends to get dirty and even-



tually requires replacement every 1-3 years. It is also easier to lose or melt. Come to the office and I'll tell you some hilarious stories about that.

Hawley retainer: This one is the old-school classic retainer your mom wore as a kid. Acrylic base with a wire across the front and clasps in the back. It can be adjusted, and it is so sturdy you could pass your original one on to your grandchildren (not literally). I personally don't think it is so comfortable, but some of my patients claim they like it better than the Essix.



Spring aligner: This is an awesome retainer. It is sturdier than the Essix, and springier and more comfortable than the Hawley. This retainer has some limitations, such as talking with it in your mouth, but it is a very good option for some select patients.



I can't discuss retention without addressing the biggest FAQ, which is: "How long do I need to wear my retainer?"

The answer is very simple. Every patient has different relapse potential, so everyone has to wear their retainer a different amount. The best way to know how long to wear your retainer, is to put your retainer in your mouth. I'll wait.... Now, if your retainer feels **tight**, it is a sign that you need to wear it **more**, maybe even a little during the day. If it is **passive**, it means you can experiment with wearing it a little bit **less**. First, start with wearing it at night only, then every other night, then once a week, then once a month. My recommendation to everybody is never to go more than a month without at least fitting your retainer in your mouth. This is because everyone goes through periods of time in their life where everything in the body starts to shift. Many patients, and even dentists, think that shifting of teeth is caused by the presence of third molars, or "wisdom teeth", but research has shown that shifting of teeth happens at the same rate even in the absence of wisdom teeth. Whatever the reason, the teeth will want to shift, but the good news is that **the size of the teeth never changes**. This means that your retainer should theoretically fit you for your entire life.

So... Theoretically, retainers are for life. This might be a sobering thought, but the good news is that a quality retainer that fits well can help you keep your beautiful smile indefinitely! I should add that a beautiful, perfectly aligned smile has a great oral health benefit, since properly aligned teeth are far less susceptible to tooth decay and gum disease. So embrace your retainer, and may you keep smiling until 120!

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