

WILL A FIXED RETAINER “FIX ALL OF YOUR PROBLEMS?”

BY DR. ELI GHERMAN

The answer to the above question, after twenty years of seeing fixed retainers from all over the world is: NO.

Fixed retainers are indicated for certain situations but many could end up causing more harm than good.

First a bit about retainers:

After all the hard work and effort to create your healthy and beautiful smile, when you get your braces off, the retainers are your “golden ticket” to keep them straight and healthy for the rest of your life.

Does that mean you have to wear retainers for the rest of your life? The answer is yes... but not the same way you wear them when you first get your braces off. When you first get your braces off, the teeth are suddenly free, no longer splinted by your braces. Your mouth is a dynamic environment filled with a lot of pressure, habits, fiber and muscle pulls. The goal of the retainer is to allow the teeth to settle and heal (kind of like an ace bandage) in their new, healthy position and prevent external forces to weaken or move the teeth into any unhealthy position, even slightly.

With this understanding, it is recommended that when you first get the braces off, you wear the retainers 4-6 months fulltime (approximately, 16-18 hours a day, excluding eating and brushing your teeth). Following this period, the retainers are worn just at

night and then, the year after, every other night. Eventually, after several years, you may be wearing them just one night per week. The key to keeping them straight is the following: **If they ever feel tighter than before it means that your teeth are shifting and you must wear them more full time until they become passive again.** If you follow these instructions, you will not need to go back to braces ever again.

SO WHY NOT JUST PUT FIXED RETAINERS AND YOU’LL NEVER HAVE TO WEAR REMOVABLE RETAINERS?

Great question and here is the answer why we don’t recommend fixed retainers for all of our patients:

As mentioned earlier, only removable retainers allow the teeth those settling movements which allow for greater healing long term. Fixed retainers are difficult to clean and thus if not taken care of can lead to cavities and even bone loss.



This is a picture I took of a patient from a different office with a fixed retainer that moved a tooth outside of the bone. I needed to remove the fixed retainer replace the braces and move the tooth back into the bone.



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As shown in the above picture, if the fixed retainer gets bent (perhaps from something stuck in it, or inadvertently from a cleaning), it can slowly move the tooth out of alignment and even off the bone. This movement can happen slowly without the patient even feeling it until it’s too late. Patients who get a fixed retainer still must wear a removable retainer over it so were their teeth to shift, they will feel it before they see it because once it becomes visually apparent, it is too late.

You should ascertain that the materials used for your fixed retainer is designed not to get bent. It could, nevertheless, happen and thus everyone who gets a fixed retainer should also get a removable retainer to wear a couple of nights per week.

Fixed retainers should be used in the following instances:

1. When there is a high chance of relapse.
2. In a periodontally-compromised patient that will strengthen the teeth by splinting.
3. If the patient refuses to ever wear a retainer, and, even then, only if the patient has good oral hygiene and agrees to test it out with the removable retainer a couple of nights per week.