ORTHODONTIC TREATMENT OPTIONS

Understanding the different treatment methods and what is right for you

If you ever wore braces as a kid, you probably remember the metal brackets, rubber bands and regular visits for adjustments at your orthodontist's office. And while wearing braces probably wasn't as fun as a trip to the amusement park, the end result was usually worth it; straight teeth, a comfortable bite and a great smile.

These days, there are many options available to people who may be interested in straightening their teeth. From those familiar metal brackets and wires to "invisible" braces that are manufactured using a digital scan or model of your mouth, orthodontists and trained general dentists have many ways to help patients. There are even services that allow individuals to skip the orthodontist office altogether and have aligners delivered to them at home.

But just like a size 10 shoe won't fit a size 7 foot, not every orthodontic treatment plan and method will work for every patient. That's because orthodontic treatment involves much more than simply straightening your teeth – even if that is your main objective.



What is orthodontic treatment?

While the most obvious outcome of orthodontics is straight teeth, treatment involves careful planning to ensure that teeth are also moved into more appropriate positions, allowing for a correct bite. This may entail moving teeth in the upper jaw to better align with teeth in the lower jaw, or vice versa. According to the American Association of Orthodontists (AAO), orthodontic treatment is a complex biological process that, "starts with a thorough [in person] examination of the [patient's] teeth and mouth, and a study of dental records such as x-rays."[1]

There are also other variables that are taken into consideration such as patient age, presence of dental restorations such as crowns, fillings and even impacted wisdom teeth. And while it's possible to move teeth at any age, adults have denser bone than a growing child's which can result in a longer treatment timeframe. Likewise, if a patient has other dental issues such as impacted teeth, crowns, decay, gum disease, etc., it may be necessary for their general dentist to coordinate care with the orthodontist to help ensure a good outcome.

Since each patient's orthodontic needs are unique, a custom treatment plan and options must always be developed by a licensed orthodontist or general dentist. The process of moving teeth involves choosing the proper orthodontic technique by a trained professional who will be responsible for your care from the day your treatment begins to the day it's complete. Having a trained professional will also help you in the future, should your teeth begin to shift or if you have questions.

Orthodontic treatment options go beyond just "metal braces" or "invisible braces" which makes working with a professional even more important. Techniques may include: traditional metal braces, lingual braces, positioners, functional appliances, or clear aligners. Due to the complexity of orthodontic treatment, the AAO recommends that patients keep regularly scheduled appointments with their orthodontist or general dentist (whoever is managing your treatment) in order to monitor treatment progress and address any issues that may arise.[3]

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What are “invisible braces”?

The term “invisible braces” refers to clear aligners. Clear aligners are a type of orthodontic appliance that slowly moves teeth into their desired positions, just like traditional braces. However, unlike metal braces, clear aligners are almost invisible and are a convenient alternative because they can be removed to brush and floss, and for routine cleanings with your dental hygienist.

Using a digital scan of the mouth or a model made from an impression of the teeth, a “series” of aligners are custom-made for the patient. The aligners are manufactured based on a computerized plan that can predict how your teeth will move during each treatment period or series. This allows the orthodontist or dentist to deliver several sets of aligners to the patient with a defined schedule that tells them which set in the series to use and for how long before switching to the next in the treatment plan series. This type of care generally means fewer visits to the office for “adjustments.” However, regular check-ups with your orthodontist or dentist are important because it allows the orthodontist to monitor progress and adjust the treatment plan if necessary.

What is “Direct-to-Consumer (DTC) Orthodontics”?

Direct-to-consumer orthodontic programs use clear aligners but the treatment plan is done without regular physical visits to the dentist or orthodontist. Studies suggest that these aligners are most successful in treating mild tooth alignment and relapse cases after previous orthodontic treatment with braces.[4, 5, 6]

DTC companies generally use a remote licensed dentist or orthodontist to evaluate an at-home-impression taken by the consumer or a 3D intraoral scan taken by support personnel at a local office. The patient is often asked to send high-quality photos of different views of their teeth to help the remote licensed dental provider determine the position and alignment of teeth and to see if the patient has any visible dental disease. Once a patient has been deemed eligible for this model of care, a treatment plan is created. Upon payment, the clear aligners are made using a variety of technologies and shipped directly to the patient’s home. From there, the patient follows the instructions provided with their series of aligners. Because of the “virtual” nature of DTC care, there are no regular in-office visits with a dentist or orthodontist.

DTC orthodontic clear aligner programs are different than clear aligner therapy delivered and monitored in person by a licensed orthodontist or general dentist. In-office care directed and managed by an orthodontic professional offers more flexibility to address cases that may be more complicated or that require collaboration between a patient’s regular dentist and their orthodontist. Because of the “hands-on” nature of this care model, providers have the ability to address a greater range of orthodontic needs and case types, and also catch any dental problems, such as tooth decay, early.

The overall cost of DTC treatment is usually under $2,000 which can be appealing to patients who may not be willing or able to pay for more traditional treatments which can cost up to 60% more.[7] However, it’s important to note that both the American Dental Association (ADA) and the American Association of Orthodontists (AAO) have issued strong caution with consumer use of DTC aligner treatment due to the very individual nature of each patient’s orthodontic needs.

What is Cigna’s position on DTC orthodontics and is this type of care a covered option for plans that include orthodontic coverage?

It is Cigna’s clinical opinion that orthodontic treatment [including, but not limited to: oral evaluations, evaluations for tooth decay, periodontal evaluations, diagnostic imaging and models, imaging scans of the mouth, treatment planning and prescriptions, placement, delivery and/or adjustment of orthodontic appliances, periodic progress assessments, and final assessments with stabilizing measures, and/or orthodontic retention] should be provided under the direct supervision of a licensed dentist/orthodontist. Direct supervision requires that a dentist/orthodontist and their patient be physically present, together, in the dental office or treatment facility. This enables the provider to personally diagnose the condition being treated, prescribe the orthodontic procedures to be performed, and supervise ongoing orthodontic care including any treatment delivered by dental auxiliaries (dental assistants, dental hygienists) when appropriate.

For DPPO and DHMO plans that cover orthodontic treatment, Cigna provides benefits for orthodontic treatment when provided under the direct supervision of a licensed dentist or orthodontist. Since mail order and DTC-type care does not require in-person case planning or management, Cigna dental plans do not cover mail order and/or DTC orthodontic programs as part of orthodontic benefits for our DPPO and DHMO products.

We recommend that all patients consult with a licensed professional to understand the risks, alternatives and benefits of any appropriate and recommended treatment plan or method to help make an informed decision about individual care.







Orthodontic Treatment Comparisons

	TRADITIONAL BRACES	IN-OFFICE CLEAR ALIGNERS	DTC ALIGNERS
Materials Used	Metal Brackets/Wires	Clear material, removable appliance (may include attachments)	Clear material, removable appliance
Average Cost	$5,500 +	$6,500–$7,000	<$2,000
Material Cost to Provider	$300–350 per case	$1,000–$1,900	unknown
Convenience to Customer	Least convenient	Yes – easier to clean teeth	Yes – remote treatment
Cosmetic appearance during treatment	Least cosmetic – can be minimized by the use of clear or ceramic brackets	Difficult if not impossible to tell when they are being worn.	Difficult if not impossible to tell when they are being worn.
Length of Treatment	18–24 months	18 months	6 months
In-Person Exam Prior to Treatment	Yes	Yes	Not typically
Current Plan Coverage	Yes – DPPO and DHMO	Yes – DPPO and DHMO	No
Impression/Scans	Yes	Yes	Yes
Radiographs Taken and Evaluated	Yes	Yes	Not typically
Prescribing Professional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Monitoring with Professional	Yes	Yes	No in-person monitoring and may have limited or no virtual support
Support for Complications	Yes	Yes	Unclear
Patient Compliance	Monitored by professional	Monitored by professional; patient also needs to be disciplined in wearing the appliance exactly as directed or treatment may be slower than expected.	Self-monitored; patient also needs to be disciplined in wearing the appliance exactly as directed or treatment may be slower than expected.
Patient Ages	Primary dentition and older	Transitional dentition and older	All permanent teeth must be erupted
Case Types	Mild, Moderate, Complex	Mild, Moderate, Some complex; Tooth extrusion, open bite, molar uprighting is challenging	Mild-Moderate Alignment, Mild bite correction

Resources:

1. American Association of Orthodontists, "Why Orthodontics?" AAOinfo.org, accessed July 3, 2019. https://www.aaoinfo.org/__/why-you-should-get-orthodontic-treatment/
2. American Association of Orthodontists, "What is an Orthodontist and Dentofacial Orthopedist?" AAOinfo.org, accessed July 3, 2019. https://www.aaoinfo.org/blog/what-is-an-orthodontist-and-dentofacial-orthopedist.
3. American Association of Orthodontists, "All About Orthodontics," AAOinfo.org, accessed July 3, 2019. https://www.aaoinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/All_About_Orthodontics-15-cons-hl.pdf.
4. Xiem Phan and Paul H. Ling, "Clinical Limitations of Invisalign," JCDA 73, No.3 (2007): 263-266, www.cda-adc.ca/jcda/vol-73/issue-3/263.html.
5. Gabriele Rossini et al, "Efficacy of clear aligners in controlling orthodontic tooth movement: A systematic review," The Angle Orthodontist 8, No. 5 (2015), 881-889, doi/10.2319/061614-436.1.
6. Tony Weir, "Clear Aligners in Orthodontic Treatment," Australian Dental Journal, Special Issue: Orthodontic Supplements 62, No. S1 (2017): 58-62, https://doi.org/10.1111/adj.12480.
7. "6 Things Every Parent Needs to Know About SmileDirectClub," SmileDirectClub, last modified May 22, 2018, Blog.SmileDirectClub.com. https://blog.smiledirectclub.com/6-things-parents-know-teen-braces-smile-direct-club/.

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