



# orthodontic treatment to address problems with your bite

**A**n orthodontist doesn't usually perform what you might think of as general dentistry work, such as fillings or extractions, but instead specialises in addressing problems that are concerned with the way your teeth and jaws work, in particular the way they are aligned.

Dentists and orthodontists refer to the way your top and bottom teeth are aligned when your mouth is closed as your bite, and orthodontics is the specialist field of dentistry that tackles any problems

you might have with your bite (technically known as malocclusion). Having a healthy bite is important because otherwise it's possible that you may also suffer from a range of other associated dental problems:

- your teeth may end up being crooked or poorly aligned
- gaps or spaces may develop between your teeth
- you may experience pain in your jaw
- the health of your gums could be affected
- you could have trouble with breathing and/or speaking

Therefore it's easy to see why dealing with any problems with your bite is important, and so if you are concerned with any of these issues, an orthodontist is the appropriate dental professional to visit.

There are two main types of conditions that orthodontists usually help patients to address in this area: overbite (more correctly known as overjet) and underbite (reverse overjet).

Overjet is a condition whereby the upper jaw extends too far over the bottom jaw so that the top teeth protrude too much. This causes problems because your teeth can wear unevenly, or damage the upper palate by rubbing against it. In addition, overjet will also affect the physical appearance of your upper teeth and may make you feel self-conscious.

Alternatively, reverse overjet is when the lower jaw protrudes beyond the upper jaw, meaning that the lower front teeth overlap those on the top. Less common than overjet, reverse overjet is often hereditary, although it can sometimes be caused by poorly spaced or malformed teeth, or habits developed in childhood. Reverse overjet will place undue stress on the jaw and can make chewing uncomfortable, perhaps also leading to your teeth becoming damaged and chipped.

**Orthodontics is a specialist branch of dentistry that can help you to tackle overbite (overjet) and underbite (reverse overjet)**



If you are suffering from an increased overjet, your orthodontist will probably recommend that you have braces fitted, as this is the most comfortable and efficient way of realigning your jaws over time and thus correcting your bite problems. Braces are now available in a wide variety of materials and designs, and your orthodontist will be able to advise you on the full range of solutions that are best suited to your particular bite problem.

The ideal time for dealing with problems caused by an unhealthy bite is during the early teenage years, when growth spurts are taking place, as at this time growth modification plates can be most effectively used — if left until later in life, it may then be the case that a surgical approach is required. Therefore, we recommend that treatment for bite problems takes place around the ages of 11-12 in girls, and 12-13 in boys — however, children should initially be seen by an orthodontist some time before this. The best time at which to do this is at the age of 7, and parents and family dentists should work together to ensure that an assessment of children's orthodontic needs is made at this time.

If you are considering orthodontic treatment to deal with problems associated with your bite, it is useful to know that in Australia, because orthodontists are primary healthcare professionals, it's possible to visit one without being referred by your dentist. Nevertheless, if you are referred, your orthodontist and family dentist will always work in partnership to create an effective treatment plan that is tailor made for you.

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