Have fun, will brush: Improving orthodontic outcomes with effective home care

Author: Dr Dana Van Elslande, Canada

Getting braces is a time of both excitement and dread. For kids and teens, braces can be a rite of passage. For adults, it is an opportunity to invest in an improved appearance and more attractive smile. With this excitement comes a bit of worry for patients (and parents) though—how will I (or how will my child) manage oral hygiene with all this apparatus in the way?

The orthodontic provider feels the same concern. Once the braces go on, brushing becomes much more challenging, and poor brushing leaves patients at risk for gingivitis, white scars and tooth decay.1 Ensuring adequate home care is one of the biggest challenges in most orthodontic offices: unless patients adopt some of the oral hygiene practices we recommend, they are not going to attain the incredible results that are possible.

Like many practices, we are seeing more adult patients every year—currently about 25% of our patients are adults. Often, they are parents of our younger patients; through their child’s experience, parents can see how the technology has changed since they were kids. Braces are gentler, easier to manage, and often have shorter treatment time. Contemporary oral hygiene products also make it easier to get from ‘braces on’ to the end goal of ‘beautiful smile’.

A comprehensive programme

Our practice adopted Crest + Oral-B OrthoEssentials because we wanted a comprehensive programme to help encourage and motivate patients with their oral hygiene. Programme elements include an office oral hygiene visual analogue chairside (Fig. 1), commitment letter, communication letters for patients and parents, a ‘how to care for your braces at home’ video, and a regimen of advanced home care products: an oscillating-rotating power toothbrush; stannous fluoride toothpaste; fluoride mouth rinse; and an orthodontic-specific dental floss. These four products work together to help reduce plaque buildup and protect teeth from gingivitis, white scars and cavities.

One unique aspect of this programme is that the office oral hygiene visual analogue chairside scale interacts with our management software, allowing us to graph patients’ hygiene over time so we can show our patients (or mom and dad) how well they are doing with self-care. Together with patients, at each appointment we score their oral hygiene on a scale from 1–5. A score of ‘1’ indicates very poor oral care, whereas ‘5’ indicates excellent care. These scores are entered into our software programme, which has the ability to generate a graph where we can monitor how the oral care is progressing throughout the patient’s treatment. It is a wonderful tool to use with children and adults alike, as it provides us with a visual representation of how performance has either improved...
(meaning we need to celebrate) or declined (meaning we need to make changes before there is irreversible damage). In addition, we incentivise patients by giving tokens at each visit if they receive scores over a ‘3’. These tokens can be cashed in for merchandise or gift cards to their favorite stores or online sites. The technology helps us engage our orthodontic patients in a fun way, and not surprisingly, adults enjoy ‘seeing’ their results just as much as kids do.

Noticeable outcomes

The OrthoEssentials kit contains four key products that work together to help achieve the outcomes we want.

The Oral-B PRO 5000 Smart Series Power Toothbrush with Bluetooth technology with ortho brush head is a cornerstone of the kit. The Ortho brush head is specifically designed to clean around brackets and wires, which can be very challenging to manage without additional tools (Fig. 2). The toothbrush’s built-in technology enhances compliance with good brushing habits. Patients begin use by downloading a free app onto their mobile device (usually a phone), then sync their power brush to the app. Every time the patient brushes, the app receives brushing data, and the patient gets immediate feedback on the mobile device screen. Using the built-in 2-minute timer, patients can see how long they have been brushing, and a red light ‘alert’ lets them know if they are using excessive force.

On the mobile screen, the app provides information about the brushing mode, battery status, and a reminder to change the toothbrush head. To keep the user experience fresh—and to keep kids checking in—the app also incorporates news, weather, and oral care tips. Additionally, the Focused Care feature can be customised to show areas of the mouth that need special attention, so the patient can brush those areas again after the regular 2-minute brushing is complete.

Crest Pro-Health toothpaste contains stannous fluoride—an active ingredient well-known to protect against plaque, gingivitis, cavities, and sensitivity. Regular use of this paste has been clinically shown to inhibit plaque build-up between brushings. The Crest Pro-Health Advanced with Extra Deep Clean Mouthwash offers additional anti-cavity fluoride protection. Oral-B Superfloss has a stiffened end floss threader that helps patients (particularly kids) easily thread floss under the braces wires.

The four components of the OrthoEssentials Kit work together to keep the teeth and gums protected and healthy. We recommend that patients brush in the morning, after lunch if possible, and then thoroughly before bed. The most important session is a very careful brushing right before bed (with, of course, no food or drinks afterwards). The combination of mechanical brushing and flossing plus chemical paste and rinse action helps to reduce plaque build-up and protect against cavities. This regimen of oral hygiene provides excellent care for patients without braces as well.

Enabling compliance

Compliance with a proven oral care regimen is essential to successful orthodontic outcomes. If a patient is not able or willing to maintain good oral care, the braces may have to be removed and treatment delayed until he or she is able to comply, so we do everything possible to set patients up for success. Technique is very important; we show our patients from the very beginning how to use each component in the kit, and we review their technique whenever we see that oral hygiene is slipping.

If a patient has certain areas they are struggling with, we can use the built-in technology to programme these areas into a diagram on their mobile device app. By working with a cell phone and the Bluetooth-enabled toothbrush, the app provides immediate feedback during home care. With these tools, the patient can continue to work on trouble areas between scheduled appointments and receive feedback on their progress.

Supported by clinical evidence

As a practitioner, I am very evidence-based, so I feel comfortable recommending ‘proven products’ to my patients that involve the most cutting edge technology available. Some patients appreciate knowing about the clinical data behind the products we recommend. For patients who are not ‘wowed’ by clinical evidence, they usually just want to know what products I use at home. I would not recommend the programme if I did not personally believe in it.

Conclusion

In the end, orthodontic treatment is not just about positioning the teeth and improving looks, it is also about better functioning and oral health. Patients are expecting a certain ‘look; when their braces are removed—beautiful, white, shiny teeth and tight pink gums—and their routine oral hygiene directly affects that outcome. We know that kids and adults are busy—so we have implemented a programme that fits into the busiest of schedules. The OrthoEssentials programme has been a game-changer for our practice, directly leading to better outcomes for our patients.

Editorial note: A list of references is available from the publisher.