



BRACE *Yourself*

Everyone's straightening up their act, as more adults adopt braces in the quest for perfect teeth. Sarah Halliwell reports

As the world becomes increasingly Instagram-centric, our self-consciousness is extending beyond hair and make-up to our teeth. While once it was just teenagers flashing metal when they spoke, now adults blithely sport wires or invisible braces. We all have our vanity dealbreaker: if Botox or filler feels a step too far, a bit of dentistry might seem a palatable way to make us feel more confident and youthful. And offers of "six-month braces" make a perfect smile sound easily accessible.

Back in the 1970s, braces were uncomfortable and embarrassing to wear, with only kids submitting to them. Now, though, they seem as much part of middle age as hair dye. WhatClinic.com notes that searches for braces have

increased 57 per cent in the past twelve months; MyDental Clinics have seen a marked rise in the uptake of short-term braces, with a 30 per cent increase since last autumn. And every orthodontist we spoke to said half their client list is made up of adults, those people who might have prioritised their children's teeth, but regarded it as purely cosmetic and a bit vain to try orthodontics for themselves.

"Everyone wants to look the best they can," says Dr Anne O'Donoghue of the Northumberland Institute of Dental Medicine. She has seen a rise, particularly among those in their forties and upwards, "and you'd be surprised how many men are looking to improve their smile," she adds. We're partly influenced by the super-straight, blinding smiles we're endlessly exposed to on Netflix; but in fact, says O'Donoghue, most patients just want to look like themselves, but better.

"People are very aware of the importance of having an attractive smile - it gives them self-confidence," says orthodontist Dr Niall LeMasney, who emphasises that straight teeth are not simply an aesthetic consideration: crooked and crowded teeth are harder to clean and can contribute to tooth decay and gum disease.

Braces are a serious investment, ranging from around €1,000 to €8,000. But it's not a one-size-fits-all solution. "In general terms, traditional 'train track' braces are the gold standard - they are tried and trusted and give excellent results," says Dr Tom Feeney of the Irish Dental Association. "Clear braces systems [like Invisalign] are attempts to improve the cosmetic deficit without train tracks, but they are not a solution for everyone." In general, clear braces are best suited to solving straightforward overcrowding or overbite. Many invest before a wedding, as receptionist Lesley Doyle did, wearing Invisalign braces (from around €2,000) for nine months. She is thrilled with the results. Model and presenter Alison Canavan recommends the Fastbraces system (from €1,600 at MyDental), discreet braces with a single wire that are suitable for high canines, overcrowding or open bite (where the teeth of the upper and the lower jaw do not touch each other, even when the mouth is closed). "Braces make a massive difference to your confidence," says Canavan.

We need to be wary of being dazzled by quick-fix solutions. Complaints concerning short-term braces alone rose by 20 per cent in 2010, with nearly all claims directed at general dental practitioners (or "cosmetic dentists") rather than specialist orthodontists. Even short-term orthodontics can have a lasting impact on your teeth's structure. "If you don't maintain them in position using a permanent retainer, you may end up requiring recurrent lifelong professional supervision," warns UK consultant orthodontist Robert Chate. Any treatment has long-term consequences. Dr Katherine Condren, President of the Orthodontic Society of Ireland, says: "Specialist orthodontists who treat patients with crooked and overcrowded teeth every day know that six-month braces only work for a small amount of patients (approximately five per cent), and in those they usually only align the front teeth but do not provide a stable bite."

The fact is, adult braces are a different ballgame. Dr O'Donoghue advises paying for a thorough, written consultation. "The diagnosis is the big issue, particularly in adults," she says. "Adult treatment is more complex - they might have gum infections or complications from poor dentistry during childhood." She likens it to wanting a celebrity hairstyle; a good stylist will advise you what's possible with your own hair type and face shape. It needs to be a holistic approach. "I also worry about procedures that are dictated by timelines," says O'Donoghue. "The good orthodontist will take as long as it needs." ■

TIPS: ON THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW

1. A specialist orthodontist will discuss all the possible types of brace suitable to correct your teeth. Be wary if you are only offered one option or one type of brace.
2. Don't go somewhere purely for a free consultation or "quick fix": a short timeline is not always based on a diagnosis, it's to sell it to you.
3. Go to someone recommended by a friend, so you can see the results for yourself.
4. Make sure you get enough time in assessment, and to decide. Ask for a written report - something tangible so you can weigh it up - and have a cooling-off period after consultation.