***The following information is provided by the AAOIC to aid orthodontists in planning patient education for maintenance use of retainers.*

The Final Phase of Successful Orthodontic Care: Maintenance**

The process of moving teeth is only the first step in achieving tooth alignment. The second, which often involves wearing a retainer, is [maintenance](https://prodv1-consumer.aaoinfo.org/blog/parent-s-guide-post/post-treatment/). You can help patients be more satisfied with their results by educating them on the importance of this critical step.

Advise your patients that orthodontic treatment can help *fix* crooked teeth but can’t prevent changes from occurring *after* the first step is complete. Just as it took time to move teeth into proper alignment, it also takes time for the bone, ligaments, and surrounding tissues to adjust to the new placement and for the bite to stabilize. As a result, the risk of relapse in the first month after treatment is very high. And if a relapse occurs, teeth may take even longer to stabilize in future treatment.

The only proven way to avoid having teeth move back to their original positions is through wearing a retainer and ongoing maintenance. [*Progress in Orthodontics*](https://progressinorthodontics.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40510-016-0137-x) confirmed that retention procedures are “considered necessary to maintain the corrected position of teeth following orthodontic treatment and to mitigate against characteristic age-related changes.” Retainers apply gentle pressure to help keep teeth from drifting back to their original positions.

Patients should also understand that teeth tend to [shift](https://www.aaoinfo.org/blog/will-my-teeth-stay-where-my-orthodontist-moved-them/?_ga=2.222120920.114486746.1545942062-1978443981.1545942062) throughout life as a normal part of aging. That's why wearing a retainer—sometimes indefinitely—is the most reliable way to maintain long-term results of orthodontic treatment. Made of plastic or metal, retainers can help keep teeth aligned after active orthodontic care is complete.

If your patients are still struggling to understand the importance of maintenance, try using a relatable analogy: When you buy a new car, it needs regular oil changes, tire rotation, and standard repairs to continue running properly. It's the same with the “new” positions of your teeth. Without regular maintenance, the teeth will gradually shift out of place and create problems. Your newly achieved smile and oral health could be lost.

**The Proper Care of Retainers**

Once your patients understand the importance of wearing their retainer, ensure they understand how to properly care for it.

There are different requirements for the care and wear of retainers, depending on the individual’s specific orthodontic needs. As an orthodontic specialist, you will be able to guide them on the best practices for their individual case.

When you discuss retainers, you may also want to educate them on the differences and the ways they can avoid problems:

* **Fixed retainers** are secured in place with bonding resin and can be more reliable for orthodontic care since they are worn 24/7. However, the obvious drawbacks to this type of retainer are maintenance costs related to its repair and/or bonding resin, as well as oral hygiene issues associated with fixed appliances.
* **Removable retainers** can be made of wire or plastic and should be worn as prescribed. The obvious drawback for this kind of retainer is that its success is dependent on the patient's compliance.

In either case, good oral hygiene is needed to assure the teeth and gums remain healthy. And patients should understand there may be temporary discomfort as they adjust to the appliance. If discomfort continues, however, they should have the retainer adjusted. In addition, if there are any other problems—loss, breakage, warp—patients should contact your office.

Orthodontic retention procedures and the possibility of retainer breakage were recently addressed in an AJO-DO [survey](https://www.ajodo.org/article/S0889-5406%2818%2930737-6/fulltext). The results suggest prevention of such breakage could be handled through regular post-treatment checkups. Let them know that it's not unusual to require an adjustment or new retainer as part of standard maintenance due to normal changes that occur within the mouth as people age, such as gradual “[uprighting](https://www.hindawi.com/journals/tswj/2014/301501/)”—the movement of front teeth on the lower jaw, which can cause the teeth to crowd and move closer to the tongue. Therefore, regular retainer checkups are necessary to assure teeth remain in place and no adjustments are needed.

Another part of educating patients is to provide [guidance](https://prodv1-consumer.aaoinfo.org/blog/taking-care-of-your-retainer/) to help with compliance and successful maintenance:

* **If the retainer is removable,** it should be kept in its protective case whenever it's not being worn. Patients should keep their retainer case with them, so that the retainer is not stored in a pocket, purse, or napkin, where it may be more easily damaged or thrown away. It's also important that the retainer is kept away from pets and heat (boiling it in water or leaving it in a hot car could cause damage). Remind them to keep the retainer clean—perhaps by brushing it with toothpaste before and after removal or using an effervescent cleanser.
* **If the retainer is fixed,** it should still be cleansed through brushing and flossing; patients may also find interproximal toothbrushes helpful.

Educating the patient on all aspects of their retainers is important so they are aware of what’s required to keep their smiles healthy.