Millions of people in the UK have improved their smile thanks to orthodontic treatment. Orthodontics can, and should, be the start of a lifetime of excellent dental health.

For more information: www.bos.org.uk

Orthodontic treatment – teeth-straightening – is a rite of passage for around one third of UK young people. Now, it would seem, a significant number of adults want to get in on the act too. A recent news story in the national media summed up the trend in the headline: How braces are the most trendy product for middle-aged women.

But let’s be clear: it’s not just women, nor is it just the middle-aged. Men and women of all ages are opting for braces. We know this from the results of a survey undertaken by the British Orthodontic Society last year. (see panel 1)

The British are finally shaking off their reputation for terrible teeth. A recent study involving The Harvard School of Public Health, University College, London, and the University of Colombia found that the mean number of missing teeth due to decay in the US is higher than in the UK and oral health in the US is worse.

You may remember the episode of the Simpsons when Lisa’s orthodontist gave her “The Big Book of British Smiles” because he wanted to terrify her into treatment. That episode is comic irony now.

Rising expectations in the UK can be attributed, perhaps, to the number of celebrities who have opted for orthodontic treatment. Some have chosen to do so publicly, making no secret of their commitment to improving their image. Others like to be more discreet.

Another factor affecting the expansion of adult orthodontics is the advent of aligner technology. Today, many thousands of adult patients are having their teeth straightened...
with clear aligners. Patients are given a series of almost invisible mouthguard-style trays – aligners – which gradually move the teeth into new positions.

They are considered to be more acceptable because they can be removed for eating and don’t carry the teenage associations of ‘train tracks’ braces. But ‘train tracks’ continue to be reliably effective and there are less visible versions – such as ceramic tooth-coloured braces for the front of the teeth or lingual braces, which are fitted behind the teeth.

Some adults appreciate braces that can’t be taken out and don’t want to go down the aligner route. They recognise that their hectic lifestyles may not be conducive to aligners. The model Siobhan Priest (pictured), for instance, opted for lingual braces; she is often travelling and was worried that she might inadvertently leave her aligners behind. Her lingual braces stayed working while she was working.

Another factor in raising awareness is the number of bloggers who are writing about their orthodontic treatment. On the one hand you have beauty bloggers writing about their aligners or fixed braces and on the other you have a blog like www.ukadultbraces.co.uk which is dedicated to providing unbiased practical information on all aspects of orthodontics for adults.

Increased choice for patients is welcome but with it comes the potential for increased challenges over decision-making. The BOS has issued guidance - Orthodontics for adults; the why, how, who and where to help patients make the right choice for them. A video to support decision-making has also been produced and can be found on the BOS website.

The reason for cautious decision-making is reflected in the BOS survey which showed that 37% of the orthodontists who responded had re-treated cases where patients have had problems. What’s happening is that some patients think they only want simple straightening of their front teeth. They realise too late that their limited treatment was more limited than they expected. It’s much harder to get good results a second time around following an unsatisfactory first course of treatment.

It’s important to remember, says Alison Murray, President of the BOS, that orthodontics can affect the way you bite and chew as well as your appearance. “It’s always a good idea to think hard before you start treatment and perhaps speak to friends or relatives and find out about their experiences. All patients should seek reassurance that the provider they choose has the necessary skill and experience to provide the option of choice.”

What should you be looking for from your provider? It’s a good idea to ask about their experience of orthodontics. Do they offer the choice of aligners, traditional orthodontics and other systems? Do they see patients on referral?

Said Dr Murray: “You are looking for someone who enjoys the confidence of both patients and colleagues. Starting orthodontics represents a big decision and it’s never a bad idea to get a second opinion if you are unsure. The BOS has a ‘Find Treatment’ area on its website to help you as well as advice and leaflets.”

It’s highly important that you have a clinician who is responsible for your care. In the last year, websites have appeared online offering treatment by post. How does this work? The answer is digital technology and involves impression kits being sent by post so patients create their own moulds and then, once fabricated using the impressions as models, the manufacturers send aligners by post. The whole treatment can proceed without seeing an orthodontist or dentist. But please be aware that it’s fraught with risk. The BOS has issued guidance to warn patients that undergoing treatment without seeing a clinician may not be in their best interests.

Dr Murray added: “The increasing demand for orthodontics in the UK is warmly welcomed by the BOS. It’s a reflection of changing attitudes towards dentistry in the 21st century and the importance of a confident smile, no matter what your age.”

For some adult patients, with complex problems relating to their jaw alignment, orthognathic treatment may be necessary. This involves orthodontics and jaw surgery which is carried out in hospital with an orthodontist and a maxillofacial surgeon working together.
to provide care. Braces are fitted prior to the surgery which involves repositioning the jaws. The orthodontic treatment continues with the jaws in a new position. The British Orthodontic Society (BOS) has produced a popular online resource relating to jaw surgery.

www.bos.org.uk/jawsurgery

Many of the adults having treatment today wore braces as a child, but failed to wear their retainers. Nowadays the advice of the dental profession is to regard retainers as part of the treatment and not an add-on at the end. In the vast majority of cases, teeth will move following treatment if they are not kept in position with retainers.

This is certainly a lesson that Jo Haines (pictured) has taken on board. Jo’s story came to be known to the BOS after she won the Society’s Against the Odds Award for the best account of treatment achieved in difficult circumstances. She needed orthodontics badly as a teenager due to a fall from a swing when aged 6. She had knocked out 4 teeth which meant her permanent teeth came through in the wrong positions. But at the end of her course of treatment as a teenager, no-one told her about wearing retainers. For more than 30 years she put up with gappy teeth.

In advance of her 50th birthday, Jo, who lives in Warwickshire, decided to have orthodontics again. It was a difficult time as her husband was diagnosed with a brain tumour which would ultimately lead to his death. After more than two years of treatment, her braces came off in time for her sister’s wedding. It was a poignant day - Jo was a bridesmaid and she was there with her husband who was still well enough to be at her side.

The following year, in order to pay tribute to her orthodontist, she decided to enter the BOS Against the Odds award which is presented annually to the patient with the best account of treatment achieved in difficult circumstances – and won.

This time around she protects the treatment she has had. To this day, she wears fixed retainers to keep her treatment safe as well as removable retainers at night as back-up. Jo is a great ambassador for orthodontics and its potential for giving patients better teeth for life. This month, the British Orthodontic Society launches a new leaflet called exactly that, Better Teeth for Life, describing the role of patients in their orthodontic treatment and the impact that it can have on their health and well-being.

Jo says: “If you want to have a perfect result from your treatment, you must be prepared for it to take time and you must be prepared to look after your smile. I see my orthodontist every year to get my retainers checked and my hygienist every three months. Once I started on my orthodontic journey, there was no stopping me. And I am still on that journey, looking after my smile.”

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