

EXPERT Advice

Dentists and Dental Specialists—Who Does What?



ABOVE Dr. Magda Barnard and Dr. Lee Erickson

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Likely you already have a dentist that you see on a regular basis. If you do not, now is the time to find one. Dental health is extremely important. Unhealthy gums and teeth have been linked to several health issues, including generalized infections and even heart disease. Dental disease

tends to be silent, so you may not see cavities or gum issues yourself or even feel pain until it is “too late” for preventative treatment or small fillings. This is why it is so important to see your dentist for checkups and cleanings as often as recommended. The frequency of these visits depends on your own individual dental health, so ask your dentist about a schedule that best fits you. Once your teeth are clean and your gums are healthy then you are ready to see the orthodontist if there are some teeth that need to be straightened or if your bite or alignment of your jaws needs to be corrected.

An orthodontist is a specialist who has an additional two-to-three years of training beyond dental school. Orthodontists specialize in straightening teeth, and also in bite and jaw alignments. It is imperative that regular dental checkups continue during braces, as the orthodontist will not be looking specifically for cavities and gum disease at braces adjustment visits. Furthermore, the orthodontist does not do the cleanings that are so important for your dental health. The orthodontist is also not licensed to perform general dentist duties, such as filling cavities or pulling teeth. Your orthodontist and your dentist work very closely together and compliment each other.

A periodontist is another specialist that you could encounter during braces, especially if you have an impacted tooth. An impacted tooth is one that is trapped inside the jaw bone and does not want to come down on its own. The periodontist would essentially cut a little window in the gum and attach a brace to this tooth to allow the orthodontist to gently guide a tooth like that into alignment. The periodontist is also the specialist that you would see should you have any gum issues, such as thin gums that may require a gum graft.



If you have wisdom teeth and no room for them, or you are fully-grown and have misaligned jaws, then the orthodontist may send you to an oral surgeon. The oral surgeon is a dental specialist that would perform complicated wisdom teeth extractions, extractions of other badly impacted teeth, and jaw surgery if it is required. When jaw surgery is planned for a patient, the patient would visit the oral surgeon for a consultation. Braces are usually worn anywhere from six to 18 months before the jaw surgery is performed. The braces stay in place for the jaw surgery and actually help the oral surgeon position the jaw bones relative to one another. The braces remain on the teeth after the jaw surgery for approximately six to 12 months and finish positioning the teeth into the new bite.

Your dentist works very closely with all the specialists and your orthodontist is a part of the team. ■