

# Online Orthodontics: TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE?



**Y**ou're scrolling through your Facebook newsfeed and you see a smiling face. It's not a friend, but an attractive model and an ad promising straighter teeth "3x faster than braces" and invisible aligners delivered directly to you. Sounds appealing, right?

Targeting younger adults, a new breed of "do-it-yourself," or DIY, online orthodontic companies offer a seemingly simple solution to those seeking a better smile: Answer a few multiple-choice questions, snap a picture on your phone, bite down on an impression tray, and "snap," you'll have some plastic teeth aligners delivered to your door.

Thousands of consumers have responded to the allure of "quick," "convenient," "cost-effective," and "hassle-free" orthodontics by putting their smile—and their oral health—in the hands of these online companies. But is it safe?

Here's what you should know before deciding on remote treatment through a direct-to-consumer orthodontic company.

## **BENEFITS OF AN IN-OFFICE VISIT**

Online, mail-order orthodontic services reportedly include remote treatment planning and case review for each customer by a licensed dentist. However, the appropriate standard of care for determining the suitability of a person for orthodontic treatment requires a clinical examination by a licensed dentist and includes the review of current X-rays.

When you see a licensed dentist, he or she will assess your overall oral health. Through a clinical examination of your teeth, bite, jaw alignment, and the relationship of your teeth to your skeletal structures, your dentist or orthodontist will identify any problems, especially those not seen with the naked eye. An in-person exam and X-rays are often critical for diagnosing if a specific treatment is right for you and helping to ensure that any treatment does not lead to more problems than it cures.

Your dentist can discuss the risks and benefits of any dental treatment, as well as options that address budgetary concerns.

## **THE RISKS**

The Massachusetts Dental Society and the American Dental Association discourage the use of direct-to-consumer ortho-

dontic aligners because self-administered, unsupervised dental treatments have the potential to cause damage and irreversible complications for patients.

It's easy to forget that teeth are alive, with complex features such as nerves, blood circulation, and roots that extend into the jawbone. Stabilized by ligaments in close proximity, teeth are not meant to move easily. Without an in-person evaluation or review of current X-rays that could identify undiagnosed dental disease or underlying issues that would make a patient an unsuitable candidate for clear aligner orthodontic therapy, a patient is at considerably higher risk of injury as a result of orthodontic treatment. A patient may be exposed to irreversible harm, including potential bone loss and receding gums, loose teeth, a misaligned bite, and other issues.

## **ONLINE ORTHODONTICS GONE WRONG**

Without direct oversight and in-person monitoring by a licensed dental practitioner, increased access to DIY orthodontics and the promise of an easy fix for complex oral health issues have the potential to place consumers on a path fraught with painful, costly, and lasting consequences.

Unfortunately, many licensed dentists across Massachusetts have encountered patients who have suffered the consequences of online orthodontics gone wrong.

One general dentist reported seeing a patient who came to her office after many months of using mail-order orthodontic aligners with "remote" monitoring by a provider. The patient complained that her teeth were moving. The mobility of the patient's teeth was so severe that she was referred to a periodontist (gum specialist) for splinting. The damage was irreversible and will require lifelong maintenance.

Another dentist saw a patient who had "finished" her DIY orthodontic treatment, but said that her front tooth started chipping after treatment. Upon examination, the dentist noted that the tooth was loose, and the patient required a significant bite adjustment and subsequent bonding.

An orthodontist saw a male patient in his late 30s who had tried mail-order aligners but, after completing the course of aligners, still did not have straight teeth. So the patient came to the orthodontist to have his teeth straightened, and upon examination, the orthodontist noted that

the patient could have benefited from tooth extractions to alleviate tooth crowding, attachments bonded to his teeth, and a procedure to remove enamel from between his teeth—all solutions that are not offered to a consumer purchasing DIY orthodontic aligners to use at home.

An oral surgeon reported seeing a patient who came in because her teeth were not moving during aligner therapy. The patient had implants, which could have been detected with an X-ray or in-person exam, but the patient reported that she never had X-rays prior to the aligner treatment.

One pediatric dentist saw a teenage patient who used a remote orthodontic company to save money. He came in for a routine cleaning and exam after completing clear aligner therapy and presented with a misaligned bite, which would require repeated orthodontics to correct it—at a likely cost of \$5,000 to \$6,000. The teen’s father contacted the online orthodontics company several times, but the company concluded that the case was complete.

In addition to these patient stories, the Better Business Bureau’s online portal shows nearly 900 complaints against a single company, including patients who reported enamel damage, jaw pain, and tooth loss after using DIY aligners. There are also Facebook groups, social media handles, and YouTube videos dedicated to consumer complaints of DIY orthodontics gone wrong.

So, before taking your dental health in your own hands, talk to your dentist.

## Have You Encountered Problems Using Online Orthodontics?

If you have experienced injury or adverse results from using mail-order orthodontic devices or undergoing remote dental treatment, you can report the issue to state and federal regulators. In Massachusetts, the Office of the Attorney General can help resolve consumer complaints against businesses, and the Department of Public Health Bureau of Health Professional Licensure investigates complaints regarding dental treatments on behalf of the Massachusetts Board of Registration in Dentistry.

### Massachusetts Attorney General’s Office Health Care Division

- Call the Health Care Helpline: 888.830.6277
- File a complaint online: [mass.gov/how-to/file-a-health-care-complaint](http://mass.gov/how-to/file-a-health-care-complaint)

### Massachusetts Board of Registration in Dentistry

- Call: 800.414.0168
- Email: [dentistry.admin@state.ma.us](mailto:dentistry.admin@state.ma.us)

At the federal level, because plastic teeth aligners and dental impression materials are regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration as “by prescription only” devices, consumers can report any problems using the FDA MedWatch Voluntary Reporting Form.

### U.S. FDA MedWatch Voluntary Report

- Visit: [fda.gov/safety/medwatch](http://fda.gov/safety/medwatch)



## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Before you pursue remote treatment through an online orthodontic company, the American Association of Orthodontists suggests some questions you may want to consider:

- Are comprehensive diagnostic records like X-rays taken before your treatment?
- How do you know if your teeth and gums are healthy enough for orthodontic treatment?
- What are the possible risks (financial, health, etc.) associated with your orthodontic treatment?
- As part of your treatment fee, do you receive any in-person visits to a dentist’s or an orthodontist’s office during your treatment?
- Who can you speak with at the online orthodontic company about your orthodontic treatment?
- Who is responsible for detecting any issues that may occur during your orthodontic treatment?
- If a doctor is involved with your orthodontic treatment, do you know the name of the dentist or orthodontist who will be involved with your case? How can you contact him or her over the course of your treatment?
- If an emergency arises, does the company have a dentist or an orthodontist in your area whom you can see in-person? If not, who would cover the costs associated with seeing a dentist or an orthodontist in your area?
- Are you asked to sign any forms that seek to release the company from liability?
- If you are injured or have another dispute involving your orthodontic treatment, how is it handled (litigation, arbitration, etc.)?