Impact of Orthodontic Treatment on Oral Health-Related Quality of Life

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Key points:

- Introduction
- Literature Review
- Impact on Physical, Psychological and Social Wellbeing
- Case Studies and Current Applications
- Challenges and Limitations
- Future Directions
- Conclusion

Abstract

Orthodontic therapy has a significant impact on a person's oral health-related quality of life (OHRQoL), going much beyond simple cosmetic improvement. Several facets of OHRQoL, such as social connections, psychological health, and physical masticatory function, can be severely hampered by malocclusions, which are characterized by misaligned teeth and unequal jaw relationships. Recent research repeatedly shows that orthodontic treatments, including both contemporary clear aligners and conventional fixed equipment, result in significant long-term improvements in OHRQoL. The cumulative improvements in masticatory efficiency, speech articulation, self-esteem, and social confidence are universally acknowledged as statistically and clinically significant, even though the early stages of treatment frequently cause transient physical discomfort and adaptation difficulties. The impact of orthodontic treatment on OHRQoL is reviewed in this article, along with its multifaceted effects across various patient demographics, current applications, inherent limitations, and future directions for clinical practice and research.

Introduction

A vital and integral part of overall systemic well-being is oral health. It directly affects a person's capacity to eat, talk, and interact with others without experiencing pain, discomfort, or humiliation. The absence of periodontal disease, oral mucosal lesions, persistent orofacial discomfort, and other conditions affecting the craniofacial complex are all included in the World Health Organization's (WHO) comprehensive definition of oral health [1] Oral Health-Related Quality of Life (OHRQoL) has become a multifaceted concept within this paradigm. It evaluates the subjective effects of oral health issues on day-to-day functioning, including physical discomfort, psychological impairment, and functional limits [2] Malocclusion—deviations from the normal occlusion of teeth—is a very common oral health problem worldwide. According to epidemiological data, more than 50% of people worldwide suffer from some form of malocclusion, many of which are severe enough to impair OHRQoL. [3] In the past, orthodontics' main clinical goal was to achieve perfect static occlusion and facial harmony. However, Patient-Reported Outcome Measures (PROMs) are becoming more important in modern evidence-based medicine, with OHRQoL being acknowledged as a crucial measure of actual

therapeutic success. [4] To recognize the holistic benefits of these interventions beyond the strict mechanical perspective, medical and dental practitioners must comprehend the comprehensive influence of orthodontic treatment on OHRQoL.

Literature Review

The Construct of OHRQoL and Its Measurement

Usually, established, standardized psychometric questionnaires are used to measure OHRQoL. The Oral Health Impact Profile (OHIP), especially its abbreviated version, the OHIP-14, is the most used tool in adult populations. The Child Perceptions Questionnaire (CPQ) is widely used for pediatric and adolescent populations. [5] Functional limitation, physical pain, psychological discomfort, physical disability, psychological disability, social impairment, and handicap are among the dimensions that these tests assess. The subjective burden of oral disorders and the long-term advantages of therapeutic therapies can be scientifically measured by researchers using these standardized parameters.

The Burden of Malocclusion

Severe crowding, diastemas (spacing), deep overbites, anterior open bites, and posterior crossbites are just a few of the clinical manifestations of malocclusions. Functional deficiencies including poor mastication and decreased speech articulation (like lisping) are often caused by these structural abnormalities. [1] [4] Additionally, crowded teeth increase the risk of dental caries and localized periodontitis by creating plaque-retentive regions that are challenging to clean. Malocclusions have substantial emotional implications in addition to these physical restrictions. Significant dentofacial abnormalities are often associated with low self-esteem, increased anxiety, and a higher frequency of bullying or victimization by peers, especially in early adolescence. [5] [6]

Modalities and General Outcomes

Fixed appliances (brackets and arch wires) or removable aligner therapy are the mainstays of orthodontic mechanotherapy. Both approaches use regulated biomechanical pressures to induce tooth movement and bone remodeling. Successful orthodontic treatment results in a statistically significant increase in overall OHRQoL ($p < 0.05$), according to systematic reviews conducted over the last five years. [3] [7] It is interesting to note that although the clinical outcome is comparable, the patient experience differs depending on the modality; clear aligners are increasingly linked to fewer detrimental effects on OHRQoL throughout the active treatment phase when compared to fixed appliances. [8]



Image 1: *Traditionally fixed orthodontic brackets and wires. While highly effective for complex tooth movements, they may temporarily reduce oral health-related quality of life (OHRQoL) during the initial adjustment period due to discomfort and mucosal irritation. Source: Wikimedia Commons, File: Teeth Braces (2). jpg, by Suyash Dwivedi.*

Impact on Physical, Psychological, and Social Well-being

Physical Well-being

Orthodontic treatment methodically addresses the functional restrictions brought on by malocclusion from a physical perspective. Correcting severe over jets or anterior open bites greatly increases masticatory efficiency, enabling better gastrointestinal digestion

and efficient food breakdown. Orthodontic therapy can improve chronic myofascial pain by minimizing asymmetric loading on the temporomandibular joint (TMJ) and reducing pathological wear on enamel by creating a mutually protected occlusion. [4]

Additionally, by removing plaque traps, the alignment of crowded dentition significantly changes the environment of the oral flora. This makes mechanical plaque control (brushing and flossing) simpler and more efficient, which immediately lowers the frequency of caries and gingival inflammation. However, it should be emphasized that nociceptive pain and masticatory difficulties can cause a temporary deterioration in physical OHRQoL during the active period of treatment, particularly during the first 7 to 14 days after appliance insertion or adjustment. [9]

Psychological Well-being

Orthodontic treatment has a major psychological influence, which may be the main reason why patients seek treatment. Human communication and self-perception revolve around the face and grin. Deep psychological distress is frequently caused by severe malocclusions, which can result in introversion, self-consciousness, and a negative body image [2]

Patients often report a significant decrease in psychological discomfort after orthodontic treatment is finished. Improved self-esteem and a more positive self-concept are correlated with a grin that is more harmonious and visually beautiful. Research that followed teenagers for five years after therapy revealed long-lasting gains in psychological well-being, with participants reporting feeling less self-conscious about their facial looks and more at ease smiling in photos. [7]

Social Well-being

The psychological advantages of orthodontic treatment are closely related to its social ramifications. People who think highly of their dental appearance are clearly more outgoing and open to trying out new social situations. Increased boldness, better interpersonal communication, and higher social integration can result from this psychological emancipation. [6]

An attractive grin has been shown to have a positive impact on adult populations' views of intelligence, competence, and employability during professional interactions. [2] As a result, the freedom to smile without fear has a positive impact on a variety of social domains, demonstrating that the social disability caused by malocclusion is highly curable with the right orthodontic treatment.

Case Studies and Current Applications

Adult Orthodontics and Clear Aligner Therapy

Orthodontics, which was once thought to be a treatment just for teenagers, has experienced a sharp increase in adult patients. The use of clear aligner therapy (like Invisalign) for individuals looking to improve their appearance without the social stigma or noticeable appearance of metal braces is a popular modern application. High patient satisfaction is often highlighted in case studies of adults treated with clear aligners. Compared to permanent appliances, individuals with removable aligners have fewer food limitations and maintain better dental hygiene. According to recent research, adults who use clear aligners report far higher OHRQoL ratings within the first six months of therapy than those who use fixed appliances. [8 9]

Interceptive Orthodontics in Pediatrics

Phase I (interceptive) orthodontics for youngsters with mixed dentition (ages 7–10) is another crucial therapeutic use. Early correction not only lowers the physical risk of dental harm to protruding incisors but also suddenly stops bullying linked to dental appearance, according to case studies involving children with severe Class II malocclusions (prominent upper teeth). [5] Interceptive orthodontics serves as a significant protective factor for a child's developing

OHRQoL by addressing these serious psychosocial stressors early.



Image 2: *Clear aligner therapy. Modern aligners have significantly improved patient-reported oral health-related quality of life (OHRQoL) during the active treatment phase due to their aesthetics and removability. Source: Wikimedia Commons.*

Challenges and Limitations

Despite the overwhelming evidence of orthodontics' beneficial effects, there are several difficulties with the therapy that may have a detrimental effect on OHRQoL, especially during the active therapeutic phase.

Latrogenic Effects and Discomfort

When orthodontic forces are applied, the periodontal ligament experiences an inflammatory reaction that causes localized pain. This discomfort can significantly restrict dietary options, momentarily lowering OHRQoL, and peaks 24 to 48 hours after changes. [9] Additionally, traumatic ulcerations on the buccal and labial mucosa are often caused by fixed equipment. Patients who have poor oral hygiene are more likely to develop hyperplastic gingivitis or white spot lesions (enamel demineralization), which can affect the final aesthetic result and necessitate additional dental care.[4]

Expectation Management and Treatment Duration

Typically lasting 18 to 24 months, orthodontic therapy is biologically limited by the rate of bone turnover. Even if the orthodontist obtains a technically flawless occlusion, unrealistic expectations about treatment speed or the end aesthetic result might cause extreme unhappiness. Maintaining the psychological components of OHRQoL requires controlling these expectations through thorough informed consent. [2]

Relapses and Retention

"Relapses" is the term for the natural physiological tendency of teeth to revert to their initial position. Crowding may recur if patients do not follow their post-treatment retention guidelines (such as wearing Essix retainers at night). Relapses are a major drawback because they instantly undo the benefits of OHRQoL that have been attained, causing patient annoyance and perhaps necessitating retreatment. [7]

Future Directions

The future of orthodontics is heavily focused on maximizing OHRQoL by minimizing treatment time and discomfort.

1. **Artificial Intelligence and Precision Medicine:** AI is being used more to optimize biomechanical forces and forecast tooth movement. AI has the potential to shorten the period of active treatment and prevent needless forces by creating highly personalized treatment regimens, which could lessen discomfort and enhance patient satisfaction [10].
2. **Accelerated Osteogenic Orthodontics:** To safely increase the pace of tooth movement, methods like micro-Oste perforations or low-level laser therapy (photo biomodulation) are being investigated. The long-term psychological and physical effects of wearing equipment are directly lessened by shortening the course of treatment.
3. **Enhanced Biomaterials:** The daily quality of life for patients receiving active therapy will be significantly enhanced by the development of shape-memory alloys that provide consistent, ultra-light forces as well as aligner materials with exceptional flexibility and stain resistance.

Conclusion

In addition to straightening teeth, orthodontic therapy is a vital medical and dental intervention that improves and restores oral health-related quality of life. Orthodontics solve major physical disabilities, reduce psychological discomfort, and breaks down important social obstacles by carefully correcting malocclusions. The comprehensive, long-term evidence overwhelmingly shows that the therapeutic benefits justify the method, even if clinicians must carefully manage the transient discomforts and limits inherent in the active phase of treatment. The incorporation of patient-reported outcomes will guarantee that orthodontic therapy stays fully focused on enhancing the patient's overall well-being as the field develops with sophisticated biomaterials and digital processes.

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