Some suggested questions/answers:

**How many people are having orthodontic treatment?**
A survey of calendar year 2012 by the American Association of Orthodontists shows that more than 5.8 million people are being treated by its member orthodontists in the U.S. and Canada.

**Who needs orthodontic treatment?**
About 3 out of 4 people could benefit from some form of orthodontic treatment.

**What is an orthodontist?**
An orthodontist is a dental specialist. “Specialist” is defined by education and scope of practice. Orthodontists get to be orthodontists by graduating from dental school, and then successfully completing at least two additional academic years of studying orthodontics at an accredited orthodontic residency program. Only people with this level of formal education may call themselves “orthodontists” or “orthodontic specialists.”

Orthodontists are uniquely trained experts whose work is in the diagnosis, prevention and treatment of dental and facial irregularities. Orthodontists work to help each patient develop a healthy bite and good function. Teeth and jaws that work well tend to have a pleasing appearance, too.

As dentistry’s experts in orthodontic care, orthodontists are highly skilled in the diagnosis of orthodontic problems – and knowing what the problem helps us tailor the right treatment. Orthodontists are also familiar with all of the kinds of treatment options on the market, and can recommend the right type of “appliance” – the formal name for devices like braces and clear aligners – for each patient’s unique needs.

**What is orthodontics?**
The official name of the specialty is orthodontics and dentofacial orthopedics. “Ortho” means to straighten; “dontic” refers to teeth, so orthodontics means to straighten teeth. “Dento” means teeth and “facial” refers to the face and jaws. So dentofacial orthopedics means to straighten or correct the face and jaws of the child.

The purpose of orthodontic treatment is to provide a good bite—teeth and jaws that work in unison so that people can bite, chew and speak effectively. The nice side effect of orthodontic treatment is that teeth look good.
Why is a good bite important?
A good bite and straight teeth help an individual to effectively bite, chew and speak. Straight teeth contribute to healthy teeth and gums because they collect less plaque, the cause of tooth decay and gum disease. Properly aligned teeth and jaws may alleviate or prevent physical health problems. Good oral health is linked to good overall physical health.

Teeth that work better also tend to look better. For some, an attractive smile may contribute to self-esteem.

What’s the best age to have orthodontic treatment?
There isn’t “one best age.” Orthodontists like to see children no later than age 7—just as the permanent teeth are beginning to come in. The orthodontist can determine if a problem is developing, and if so, when treatment should begin. Most youngsters begin treatment between the ages of 9 and 14. But healthy teeth can be moved at any age—because the process of moving teeth is the same in children and adults. About 1 in 5 orthodontic patients is age 18 or older—sometimes much older. Patients in their 30s, 40s, 50s and older regularly seek treatment. With proper care, teeth can last a lifetime. And sometimes orthodontic treatment is part of an individual’s plan of care.

Is all orthodontic treatment done with braces?
No—there are a variety of what orthodontists call “appliances” that are used to move teeth and align jaws. Most people are familiar with traditional stainless steel brackets and wires that constitute braces. And these are widely used. But there are braces that have tooth-colored brackets, making them less noticeable. There are braces that go behind the teeth, called “lingual” braces. There are braces that aren’t braces at all, but are a series of clear, plastic-like removable trays called “aligners” that can be used to move teeth.

Other appliances can be used, particularly in patients who may still have baby teeth, to help make the upper jaw wider and make room for permanent teeth to come in; to help the upper and lower jaws grow in a good relationship to each other; or to help in correcting habits that can affect the position of teeth and jaws, such as sucking the thumb or fingers.

Orthodontists know about the full range of devices used in orthodontic treatment, and what works best in different situations.

Does orthodontic treatment hurt?
Not really. While there may be some mild discomfort when treatment begins, or when appliances are adjusted, the discomfort is often easily relieved with over-the-counter analgesics.
Are there any signs to watch for in children that would indicate they need to see an orthodontist?
Some things parents might watch for include:
- Early or late loss of teeth
- Difficulty in chewing or biting
- Mouth breathing
- Thumb sucking
- Crowding, misplaced or blocked-out teeth
- Jaws that shift or make sounds
- Speech difficulties
- Biting the cheek or roof of the mouth
- Teeth that meet abnormally, or don’t meet at all
- Facial imbalance
- Jaws that are too far forward or too far back
- Grinding or clenching of teeth

An educational guide called “Problems to Watch for in Growing Children”—complete with several photos—can be found on the American Association of Orthodontists’ website, mylifemysmile.org.

When parents spot a problem, regardless of the child’s age, they should visit an orthodontist for a consultation. (If complimentary consultations are customary in your area, it would be appropriate to mention it here.)

What about adults?
About one in five orthodontic patients today is an adult. In addition to a poor bite, adults might also have gum problems, worn teeth, decayed teeth, misaligned jaws or other problems. In these cases, it might require a team effort—the orthodontist, general dentist and other dental specialists—to bring the patient to good dental health.

It’s common today for adults in their 30s, 40s, 50s and beyond to seek orthodontic treatment.

People are keeping their natural teeth longer than previous generations. A study by the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research showed that among people between the ages of 55 and 64, the rate of toothlessness dropped 60 percent since 1960.
I had braces as a teen, but my teeth have moved. What can I do?
Some adults who previously had orthodontic treatment find that as they mature, their teeth have shifted. Some adults are seeking orthodontic treatment for a second time to correct misaligned teeth.

People sometimes think teeth are set in stone, that once they’ve been moved through orthodontic treatment, they will not move again. But teeth are set in bone, which is living tissue. Bone continuously breaks down and rebuilds, responding to forces created by biting, chewing and speaking.

Wearing retainers as prescribed is the best way to minimize this movement.

How long does orthodontic treatment take?
The length of treatment varies with the severity of the problem, and by how well the patient fulfills their responsibilities in treatment by keeping teeth, gums and braces clean and by avoiding some foods during treatment. But on average, it takes about 22 months for orthodontic treatment. Patients will wear retainers after their braces are removed or their other orthodontic appliances have done their jobs—some retainers are worn temporarily, some permanently.

Orthodontic treatment is not a quick fix—it’s a healthy fix. Orthodontists work to create a healthy bite in patients and a lasting result.

Are there any recent advances in orthodontics?
Yes – lots of them!

Improvements in the devices we use to move teeth and align jaws make treatment more comfortable for the patient, have decreased treatment time, and made it possible to lengthen the interval between appointments, so there’s less time away from school and work.

For example, one of the most exciting advances is the use of nickel-titanium, or ni-ti, wires. The wire “remembers” what shape it’s supposed to be in. Because of that, it exerts continuous, but gentle forces that help to move teeth faster and more comfortably.

Braces themselves continue to improve. The brackets are small and sleek, and are bonded directly to the teeth. The adhesive used releases fluoride to help keep the tooth healthy during orthodontic treatment. Some brackets can be tooth-colored, so are nearly invisible. In some cases, braces can be placed behind the teeth for total invisibility. These are called “lingual” braces.

There are even braces that aren’t braces at all, but are clear, plastic trays, called “aligners;” some people can use them to nudge teeth toward their proper positions. The orthodontist is the best person to consult about the type of braces best suited to move an individual’s teeth.
Some advances that patients might not see, but certainly benefit from, have to do with imaging technology (x-rays). The better we can see a problem to diagnose it, the better treatment can be tailored to correct it.

**What happens if orthodontic problems are not treated?**
Untreated orthodontic problems might contribute to tooth decay, gum disease, bone loss, worn down teeth, or loss of teeth. The problems tend to get worse as a person gets older.

**How do I find an orthodontist?**
Use the “Find an Orthodontist” service on the American Association of Orthodontists’ website, mylifemysmile.org. You can also ask your family dentist for a referral—or talk with family and friends about orthodontists they have visited.

Always look for a member of the American Association of Orthodontists because only orthodontists are eligible for membership. A doctor’s membership in the American Association of Orthodontists is the public’s assurance that the doctor is an orthodontist—someone who has successfully met the educational requirements of an advanced orthodontic specialty education program. For orthodontists, that means first graduating from dental school, followed by 2-3 academic years of studying orthodontics in an accredited orthodontic residency program. There are only 67 accredited programs in the United States, and 6 in Canada.

**Where can I get more information?**
Visit mylifemysmile.org.