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Brace yourself - today's orthodontics are far more effective than they used to be.

By Heather Welford

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So are you thinking of having the lower ones done, too?" asked my dentist when I raised the question of dental braces. Lower ones? I looked in the mirror, and he pointed out that while my lower incisors were straight(ish), they were a whole millimetre further to the left than nature intended. I'd hardly noticed before. But once I saw them, I realised I had a double set of snaggles, top and bottom.

My first concern had been my misaligned upper front teeth, with their weird and worsening overbite. The two top incisors almost crossed each other, and came too far over the lower teeth.

I am not alone in opting for braces in my middle age (I'm 58). Increasing numbers of older adults are choosing to fix their crooked and often far-from-pearly whites. Or at least that's the experience of orthodontist Ross Hobson, from Newcastle's Windmill Dental Practice, whom I'll be seeing a lot of over the two years that it will take to put my teeth right and keep them that way.

"Older people are more interested because today's treatments to straighten teeth are far more effective and less invasive than they used to be," he says. My

own reason for trying braces is pure vanity. I'm not after a Hollywood-style set of dazzlers: I just want nice, straight teeth for the first time in my life.

My teeth weren't always crooked: they're the result of earlier extractions, done at a time when dentistry was more invasive. Other teeth tried to fill the gaps, creating what Americans know as "a British smile". Small wonder that the actor Mike Myers added the gruesome gnashers to his Austin Powers costume to make him look more English.

I've gone for the mid-price choice of visible but tooth-coloured braces, formed of a wire held to each tooth with a ceramic retainer. This will cost me between £3,000 and £4,000. The ceramic retainers remain bonded to my teeth until Hobson removes them in a couple of years. He adjusts the wires every six weeks. I could have had the cheaper, train-track braces, in which the retainers are metal as well as the wires. Or I could have gone for the top dollar option, called lingual braces, which are bonded to the inside of the teeth and totally hidden.

An initial appointment involves the taking of detailed measurements and a mould, and the resulting brace is tailor-made and adjusted to fit. Braces move the teeth as a result of gradual pressure, stretching the periodontal membrane and encouraging bone growth to support the tooth in its new position.

I've been wearing mine for a couple of months now. They don't hurt, and they don't interfere with my sleep. The metal brackets that hold each end of the wire, and are attached to my back molars, scratch the inside of my cheek if I don't put a dab of dental wax over them, but that's easy enough to do. I can't use my front teeth, so I chop food first, rather than bite it. Salad is hard to eat – scraps of lettuce tend to hang off the wire as if it were a washing line. To clean my teeth, I have to use tiny interdental brushes to get under the wires.

The downsides are few, so the main question is – are they working? The answer is a definite yes. My snaggles are already looking straighter – and I can't wait for my braces to finish the job.