



Are your teeth aging you?

A trip to the dentist—not the derm—may be the key to reversing the effects of time

BY SYDNEY LONEY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFFREY CARLSON

A few months ago, my mother and I were out for lunch when I caught her studying my face. She chewed her penne arrabiata thoughtfully for a moment, then informed me that my teeth were starting to make me look old (a comment only a mother can make). This observation was immediately followed by some intense scrutiny in the mirror in the ladies'—and a hastily booked date with an orthodontist.

Sadly, Dr. Christine Hibberd confirmed that my mother is right: My teeth are aging me. It seems that I've been stress grinding, and it's not only wearing down my molars, it's also changing the shape of my jawline. An overbite that didn't exist in my 20s has slowly materialized, and my teeth have begun leaning in—and not in a

“You go girl!” kind of way. All of this movement has ultimately made my lips look thinner and my face look less full (read: old).

I was horrified. I'd never needed braces as a kid and now, in my mid-40s, it felt as though my days of smiling for the camera were over. If things were this bad now, what

would they be like in 10 years? I pictured the episode of *The Simpsons* in which Lisa is told she needs braces—and a sinister cartoon dentist uses a computer to show her the terrifying path her teeth will take if she doesn't get them.

Hibberd used a similar, computer-generated technique when I visited her sunny clinic in Oakville, Ont., but in this case, it was designed to show me how the state of my smile would improve, frame by frame, as my teeth slowly straightened back into place. She was also quick to reassure me that I wouldn't be the only 40-something walking around with railroad tracks—far from it, in fact. These days, 30 to 40 per cent of her patients are adults. (When she started out five years ago, it was 20 per cent.)

“A lot of patients will say, ‘My teeth

were a little crooked when I was a kid, but now they're really crooked,’” Hibberd explains. “I also see people who had braces when they were 15, and their teeth are a mess now. The problem is that your teeth always move.” Fortunately, Hibberd says, it's never too late to do something about it. “I have an 82-year-old patient who came in and said, ‘I want straight teeth.’ We did it, and she looks fantastic.”

There are a lot of factors that can alter the appearance of your smile as you age: Maybe you sleep with your mouth open (when you breathe through your mouth, your teeth move); Maybe your teeth are always touching because of the way the muscles in your mouth work; Maybe you're a grinder, like me. All of these things can add more years to your face than a few crow's feet do.

Hibberd says women don't usually notice that their teeth have changed. Instead, they notice their lips. “They'll tell me that their lips look thinner,” she says. “Once your bottom teeth start to slope inward, the top teeth follow, which changes the drape of your upper lip. Your teeth are like scaffolding, and if the support isn't there, your lips look less full.”

Often, women head straight to a cosmetic dermatologist, hoping that an injection of some kind will solve the problem. But it won't, says Dr. Ed Philips, a cosmetic dentist in Toronto and author of *Your Guide to the Perfect Smile*. Philips explains that teeth also get shorter as we age. “They just wear down,” he says. “By the time you're in your 40s, you'll have lost anywhere from one to three millimetres of the length of your top teeth. While injections might help fill your lips out again, your top teeth won't show, making your lips look overdone because your top teeth aren't visible when you speak naturally.”

Philips believes anyone can age gracefully with wrinkles and laugh lines, but teeth are a deal breaker. “Aged and worn teeth have a huge impact on your appearance,” he says. “After 35, there's nothing that will make you look younger more than a healthy smile.”

For some, the solution might be veneers, which can lengthen the top teeth or improve the “architecture” of

a misshapen tooth. (Philips charges roughly \$1,800 per veneer, which is a thin porcelain shell that is cemented to your existing tooth.) However, if your teeth have moved or become crooked (like mine), the only option is to straighten them.

Before I committed to braces, Hibberd sent me to a periodontist. (“If I'm moving teeth around, I want to make sure the gums are in good condition,” she says.) Then, I was given the option of braces or Invisalign, which is essentially braces for grown-ups. While both methods achieve the same result, you can eat and drink whatever you like with Invisalign, and they're far less noticeable (they look almost like a clear bleaching tray that you wear 22 hours a day and switch every seven days as your teeth begin to shift). Having a good dental plan helps, as the treatment ranges from about \$4,000 to \$8,000. Cosmetic dentistry, on the other hand, isn't covered unless a tooth is badly decayed or weakened, in which case some plans will cover a crown.

In the end, I decided Invisalign was worth it. If I didn't address my dental issues, my teeth would be more prone to cavities, further recession and cracking. Straight teeth are also healthier for the gums and easier to clean. Most of all, straight teeth are a huge confidence booster, Hibberd says.

“We so often worry about that little wrinkle on our foreheads,” she says. “But once I've straightened someone's teeth, they're more confident. They walk in smiling and showing their teeth. They look younger and more vibrant.”

Hibberd told me to keep my first “tray” and promised I would be amazed by the difference between it and the final one, which I'll remove once and for all about a year and a half from now. On my way out of Hibberd's office, I ran into a woman in her mid-50s who was close to the end of the Invisalign process. She told me that the biggest change she's noticed in her appearance so far has been getting “volume” back in her face. Then, she flashed me a bright, confident smile that would dazzle anyone—even my mother.

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