You’ve probably seen commercials for “smile improvement,” which is usually a kinder, gentler way of saying orthodontia. Maybe it’s the cultural obsession with selfies, or maybe it’s the fact that braces have improved by orders of magnitude in the past 20 years, but a lot of adults are having their teeth straightened.

According to orthodontist Garrett Criswell of Monterey Bay Orthodontics and John Eisinger, an orthodontist with offices in Carmel, Monterey and Marina, between 25 and 50 percent of their patients these days are grown-ups. Sometimes adults are referred by their dentists, because bad alignment can cause more than just cosmetic issues.
Wear and tear on enamel, damage to roots and bone, tooth decay and gum problems can be caused by crooked teeth.

Eisinger said that often, the patient has had a change in life — a new job that requires public speaking, for example, and Criswell said that sometimes, it’s just a matter of parents having finally taken care of all the kids’ dental issues and having the time and money for themselves.

Criswell said that although the mechanics are more or less the same, it’s a little different dealing with the adults than the kids. “You can connect with them about their kids and their jobs and have an adult conversation,” he said. And while kids aren’t very picky, or don’t think they need braces at all, “The adults are also very specific about how they want their teeth to look.”

Many people have childhood memories of seeing their friends with mouths full of metal, but Eisinger said that some of today’s straightening devices are practically invisible. Many can also be applied more precisely, to give each patient an alignment tailored to their unique needs.

There are a wide variety of options available, and they’re faster and less painful than the older approaches. One thing Criswell did say about correcting adults’ teeth is that patients should be prepared for a little bit of adjustment. “They’ve had the same bite for 20-30 years, and pretty much every tooth is going to move a little. They’ll be uncomfortable for a little bit.”

Criswell noted that for almost all patients, ibuprofen or Tylenol are sufficient to help with the initial inflammation. And, Eisinger added that not everyone’s a good candidate for every treatment, and some conditions require more advanced interventions, including surgery.

Eisinger used models of different kinds of appliances — orthodontists’ term for braces and other straightening gear — to explain how modern devices work, starting with Damon braces. They’re named for their inventor, dentist Dwight Damon of Spokane, Wash.

Instead of using metal brackets or elastic bands, Damon braces have little gates on the front of the portions that attach to the teeth. The wires run through the gates and can move freely, placing less pressure on the teeth.
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Although it’s counterintuitive, the technique makes for faster, less painful alignment because the blood flows more freely to the bone and the teeth can move more easily. It also eliminates the regular tightening required for older types of braces.

In fact, Eisinger said, patients usually have half as many visits as they did with old-style braces, and Damon braces can shorten straightening time by as much as six months to a year. Criswell also uses them, along with an assortment of other widely available braces.

One type of appliance that gets a lot of television airplay is the Invisalign — a series of clear plastic trays that fit over the teeth and are nearly invisible. Another brand that’s in use is eCligner, which differs from Invisalign in that it starts out with a soft, thin tray and progresses to a firm, thicker tray. The trays have to be worn 22 hours a day, and are taken out for meals.

Another thing that can help with straightening is AcceleDent, a small electronic device that fits in the patient’s mouth, much like an athlete’s mouth guard. It’s used for 20 minutes a day, and emits tiny vibrations at a frequency that is clinically proven to help speed bone changes that are necessary for teeth to move, and also reduces discomfort.

Maintaining teeth while wearing braces requires a little extra effort, and some common sense. Hard foods, like carrots and apples, need to be cut up, and you have to brush regularly — although electric toothbrushes and Waterpik make that job a lot easier, Eisinger said.

And of course, once the teeth are just the way you and your orthodontist want them, you’ll be using a retainer for the rest of your life to keep them looking good.

So, if you don’t like the smile you see when you look at that photo, know that there are many different ways to change it, and make an appointment with an orthodontist soon.