

PATIENT GUIDE

Retainers: wearing and looking after them

Why the retainer is the part that keeps the result, how the schedule changes over the first year, and how to keep it clean and un-lost. · 31 Aug 2026

Braces and aligners move teeth; a retainer keeps them where they were put. The bone and gum around a newly moved tooth take a year or more to settle, and teeth keep drifting slowly for life, so the retainer is worn most in the first year and then at night, long term. Treat it as the last stage of treatment rather than an accessory.

1 yr of the most wear

The first year is when teeth most want to drift. Wear the hours we give you at the debond; they change as the months pass.

nights long term

After the first year, nightly wear is what keeps a finished smile finished. It becomes as automatic as brushing.

case every time it is out

Retainers are lost in tissues, school bags and restaurants. The case is the only place it goes.

Your schedule

We set the hours at the debond and write them down. A common shape is full time for the first months (out only to eat and brush), then evenings and nights, then nights only; the exact steps depend on your teeth. Move to the next step only when we say, not when it feels loose or tight, and message us if you are unsure which step you are on.

Putting it in and taking it out

A clear retainer seats like an aligner: front teeth first, then press down at the back with your fingers. Never bite it in. A wire-and-plastic retainer (a Hawley) goes in with the plastic against the roof of the mouth or behind the lower teeth and the wire across the front; ease the clasps over the back teeth with your fingers. Remove either by lifting at the back on both sides. Retainers that feel tight after a night off are doing their job; that tightness is teeth being put back.

Cleaning

1. Rinse when it comes out

Cool water, every time. It stops saliva drying into a film.

2. Brush it daily

A soft brush, cool water, and a drop of liquid soap if you like. No toothpaste on clear plastic: it scratches and clouds.

3. Deep clean weekly

A retainer cleaning tablet in cool water for the time on the packet. Never hot water, never bleach, never the dishwasher.

4. Clean teeth underneath

Brush before it goes in at night. A retainer over unbrushed teeth holds plaque against the enamel all night.

Message us if

- It cracks, a wire bends, or a clasp breaks.
- It has stopped fitting, or hurts to put in after a gap in wear.
- It is lost. A few days without is fine; a few weeks is not. See the lost-retainer guide.
- You are unsure which step of the schedule you are on.

Call us on (09)520 1880 or email hello@milkkorthodontics.co.nz.

Common questions

How long will I wear a retainer?

Nights, long term. There is no age at which teeth stop being able to move, so most orthodontists now advise indefinite night wear. It takes about a minute a day.

Do retainers wear out?

Yes. Clear retainers last one to three years with care; wire retainers longer. When one cracks or clouds, we make a new one from the scan we keep.

A minute a night keeps years of work in place.