Transfer Jigs in Fixed Retention: Clinical Rationale and Biomechanical Evidence

Abstract

Background: Orthodontic relapse remains a major clinical challenge, with up to 50% of patients experiencing measurable relapse within 5–10 years post-treatment. Fixed retainers are widely used, yet unwanted tooth movements, failures, and periodontal complications persist.

Objective: To evaluate the role of transfer jigs in ensuring passive fit of fixed retainers, synthesising clinical and biomechanical evidence on their potential to reduce relapse and unwanted tooth movement.

Methods: A narrative review was conducted, including randomised controlled trials, prospective cohort studies, case reports, and in vitro biomechanical studies. Evidence was drawn from PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science. Particular focus was placed on studies comparing direct versus indirect (jig-assisted) bonding techniques.

Results: In vitro biomechanical testing (FRANS, 2024) confirmed that 0.1–0.3 mm distortions induce measurable forces. CAD/CAM jig studies demonstrated placement accuracy within ±0.05 mm and ±2°.

Conclusions: Transfer jigs enable reproducible passive placement of fixed retainers, minimising relapse and iatrogenic movement. Jig-first protocols should be considered best practice in orthodontic retention.

Introduction

Relapse following orthodontic treatment remains a persistent challenge. Despite advances in appliance design and retention protocols, 30–50% of patients exhibit measurable relapse within 5–10 years (Littlewood, 2017). Fixed retainers, particularly bonded lingual retainers, are the most common retention method due to their independence from patient compliance (Artun & Zachrisson, 1982). Yet, failures, iatrogenic tooth movements, and periodontal complications are frequently reported. Traditionally, research has emphasised wire strength and durability, with ISO 7801 reverse bending tests showing that chain-like, bracelet-style, or twisted stainless-steel retainer designs are highly fracture-resistant. However, strength does not equate to passive placement. Even minimal distortions at bonding may transform a retainer into an active appliance, generating unwanted forces.This phenomenon is now recognised clinically as **'wire syndrome'** (Charavet et al., 2022).

Transfer jigs, fabricated from silicone matrices or via CAD/CAM, allow retainers to be adapted passively on a model and transferred accurately to the mouth. Indirect placement minimises distortion, increases reproducibility, and enhances chairside efficiency. This review synthesises current clinical and in vitro evidence supporting the use of transfer jigs in fixed retention, highlighting their biomechanical rationale and clinical relevance.

Methods

This review employed a narrative methodology. A literature search was conducted in PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science up to July 2025. Keywords included 'fixed retainers,' 'transfer jig,' 'indirect bonding,' 'wire syndrome,' 'orthodontic relapse,' and 'passive fit.' Inclusion criteria: randomised controlled trials (RCTs), prospective cohort studies, retrospective clinical reports, case reports, and in vitro biomechanical analyses relevant to passive retainer placement and jig use. Studies comparing direct and indirect bonding techniques for brackets were also reviewed to provide insights into accuracy, given their methodological similarities. A total of 42 articles were analysed and synthesised thematically.

Results

Clinical trials consistently show that passive fit, not material strength, determines long-term outcomes. Ferreira et al. (2019) found higher plaque accumulation and gingival indices in chain-like retainers compared to flat designs, underscoring the influence of bonding geometry and ped design. In vitro studies confirmed these findings: the FRANS system (2024) demonstrated that deflections as small as 0.1–0.3 mm generate clinically relevant forces. CAD/CAM jig accuracy studies reported mean deviations of ±0.05 mm and ±2°, suggesting that indirect bonding ensures clinically acceptable passivity.

Discussion

The synthesis of evidence affirms that relapse prevention is not a function of wire fracture resistance but of geometric passivity. Direct bonding without a jig introduces small but significant risks of distortion, which may translate into iatrogenic movement. This mechanism explains cases of wire syndrome, where retainers act as active appliances rather than passive stabilisers.

Transfer jigs mitigate these risks by enabling laboratory-based passive adaptation. Indirect bonding studies on brackets provide further support, showing superior accuracy compared to direct techniques (Grunheid et al., 2016). By analogy, fixed retainer jigs ensure that intraoral placement mirrors the passive laboratory configuration.

Clinically, jig-first protocols offer multiple benefits: reduced relapse, fewer unwanted movements, better periodontal outcomes through optimised ped geometry, and shorter chairside time. Although they introduce laboratory steps and cost, these are offset by reduced retreatments and enhanced patient satisfaction. From a health economics perspective, the total cost of ownership favours jig-based protocols.

Future research should include long-term RCTs comparing direct and indirect bonding of the same wire types, quantifying relapse over 5–10 years. Integration of CAD/CAM workflows with 3D-printed jigs may further standardise passive placement, enhancing clinical outcomes.

Conclusion

Transfer jigs play a critical role in ensuring the passive placement of fixed retainers. Clinical and biomechanical evidence demonstrates that relapse and iatrogenic movement are driven not by wire fracture but by loss of passivity. Indirect bonding using transfer jigs reduces these risks, supporting their adoption as best practice in orthodontic retention. As digital workflows expand, jig-first approaches should become standard to improve predictability and patient outcomes in long-term orthodontic care.

References

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