

How to get That bright white smile

by Dr. Warren C. Edwards.

A person's smile is vital to their self-confidence and, ultimately, their personal and professional success. In fact, statistics gathered from an American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry (AACD) consumer survey revealed that 85% of adults believe an unattractive smile makes a person less appealing to the opposite sex, while almost three-quarters of us feel an unattractive smile can hurt a person's chances for career. Worse yet, the same survey discovered just 50% of Americans are satisfied with their smile!

These days there is plenty of talk about cosmetic dentistry. We are barraged with information regarding how to get brighter, whiter teeth. Walk through the aisles of your local drug store and the choices are nearly endless. A search on Walgreens.com for dental whitening products came up with 78 matches including: Smile White, Dental White, Dr. Georges, Optiwhite, Natural White and White Strips.

In order to make a smart decision, you need to understand a few basic facts about tooth whitening. There are two kinds of discoloration. Extrinsic discoloration is on the surface and is caused by such staining agents as tea, coffee and wine. This type of discoloration can be removed by a professional prophylaxis or cleaning. Intrinsic discoloration is developed internally from the penetration of discoloring agents during tooth development. Illness, trauma and the aging process also darken our teeth. An oxygenating process that penetrates into the interprismatic spaces of the tooth structure is the only way to remove this type of discoloration.

Three types of products are on the market. Over-the-counter products work to a certain degree, using a low concentration of a whitening agent. This whitening agent is further diluted by saliva and can seep into the body. The degree of whitening varies by user and is dependent upon product and usage.

The first type of professional whitening is the take-home variety. In this situation, the dentist takes molds and then makes custom flexible trays for the patient. At night the patient puts a thicker, stronger whitening agent, usually carbamide peroxide, into the tray, which is placed against the teeth for several hours while the patient sleeps. This higher concentration of whitening agent is more effective than the commercial product. Seepage of the whitening agent is minimized, but the increased concentration can lead to increased dental sensitivity.

In-office whitening has proven to be the most effective. A strong concentration of hydrogen peroxide is the main ingredient, but the chemical is quite caustic to the gums,

so barriers are put in place. Heat was initially used to improve the oxygenation process but gum irritation and dental sensitivity increased. Lasers were used but again sensitivity and irritation were the problem. The latest in office whitening techniques use a much thicker hydrogen peroxide gel and are activated by a light. Barriers to prevent irritation and seepage have been improved. In-office one-hour whitening systems, such as ZOOM! offer the most significant improvement in whitening. In almost all case there will be gradual darkening of bleached teeth over time although it will rarely darken to the original color. For this reason, trays to 'touch up' and maintain the result usually supplement in-office whitening.

Is whitening for everyone? Not necessarily. The teeth and gums need to be healthy with no decay, defective restorations or gum disease. It is not advised for pregnant or nursing mothers, those with certain medical conditions or taking specific medications. Consult your dental professional. Those with restorative dental work such as visible crowns, veneers and fillings will not see any appreciable difference as the teeth around them whiten. Those with a history of dental sensitivity should proceed with caution.

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