

Which Whitener Works?

by Dr. Warren C. Edwards.

Whitening your teeth is a quick way to improve your smile. Store shelves are packed with tooth whitening products, and several methods are available through dentists. Which approach or product is right for you?

In part, the answer depends on the source of your tooth discoloration. Discoloration on the tooth surface (*extrinsic* discoloration) is caused by staining agents such as tea, coffee, and wine, and can actually be removed by a professional cleaning (*prophylaxis*). Internal (*intrinsic*) discoloration develops internally from the penetration of discoloring agents during tooth development. Illness, trauma and the aging process also darken teeth. This deeper discoloration can only be removed by bleaching. Bleaching whitens by penetrating deeply into the spaces of the tooth structure and oxygenating the discoloration, causing it to lighten.

Over-the-counter products for home use contain lower concentrations of whitening agent than the products available through your dentist. This whitening agent is diluted by your saliva, and can seep into your body. The degree of whitening varies by user, product and application, but rarely approaches the degree of whitening that can be accomplished with bleach prescribed by your dentist. According to the Good Housekeeping Institute "Crest Night Effects" is the best over-the-counter product. But the most effective whitening systems are available through your dentist.

One-hour in-office whitening systems, such as Zoom!TM, will get your teeth the whitest. First, the dental professional paints your gums with a liquid plastic coating, to prevent seepage and to protect your gums from irritation by the whitening agent. Then she applies a thick gel containing a strong concentration of hydrogen peroxide, and uses a special light to speed the bleaching process. (Earlier processes used heat or laser as activators, but both caused increased sensitivity and irritation.)

If one-hour whitening is not for you, your dentist can provide a more gradual but highly effective system for home use. The dentist takes molds of your teeth and makes custom, flexible trays. At night or for as short as an hour or two you put a thick, strong whitening agent, usually carbamide peroxide, into the tray, which you place against your teeth for several hours while you sleep. Seepage of the whitening agent is minimized. The higher concentration of whitening agent is more effective than over-the-counter products, but can lead to temporary tooth sensitivity.

Whitening is not safe for everyone. Before you begin, you should first have a comprehensive oral exam and get your dentist's advice. Your teeth and gums need to be healthy with no decay, defective restorations or gum disease. You should not whiten if you are pregnant or nursing, Certain health conditions and medications are also excluded. If you have restorative dental work such as visible crowns, veneers and fillings, they will not change as the teeth around them whiten. If you've had a problem with sensitive teeth, proceed cautiously.

Will the whitening last? In almost all cases, there will be gradual darkening of bleached teeth over time, although it will rarely darken to the original color. Home-use trays to “touch up” and maintain the result usually supplement in-office whitening.

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