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How to Get a Brighter, Whiter Smile: All About Teeth Whitening

Topics Covered:

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How to Get a Brighter, Whiter Smile: All About Teeth Whitening

An Introduction to Teeth Whitening

Everyone wants pearly white and glossy, shiny teeth, the kind of smile you see on the movie stars and TV actors. But all teeth naturally yellow or color with age, diet, smoking or illness. Teeth can turn yellow, grey, or brown. Some people naturally start out with more grayish teeth than others.

Most whitening methods work well on teeth which have yellowed, and some whitening can be done if teeth are brownish or greyish. There are a variety of methods you can try to whiten your teeth, including home remedies such as rubbing teeth with strawberries before brushing, special whitening kits you can buy at the drug or grocery store, and treatments at your dentist's office.

Your first steps in whitening your teeth should be a visit to your dentist. Besides regular teeth cleaning, which keeps your teeth clean and healthy, your dentist can offer products and suggestions as to methods you can use. You should also be brushing regularly with a soft bristle toothbrush, as well as flossing daily. It is best to brush after every meal, drink, or snack.

You can learn about: in-office bleaching by your dentist, laser treatments, tray-based home bleaching, strips which bleach your teeth, gels which bleach your teeth, abrasives which remove stains, or other stain removal methods such as whitening toothpaste. Some of these methods only remove the surface stains which may have built up as a layer over top of your teeth, while other methods change the actual color of your teeth by over 3 shades. Either will improve the color of your natural teeth. If you have had dental work done, such as fillings, caps, and crowns, you may want to discuss with your dentist a porcelain veneer or other method of changing the color of your filling, as your filling was made to match the color of your teeth when it was put in.

Whatever method(s) you choose to try to whiten your teeth, you always want to be careful of your teeth – a perfect smile doesn't always make up for damaged teeth and gums, does it? Carefully research each tooth whitening method to make sure it is safe for your teeth. While treatments from the dentist (except for some laser whitening) are usually approved by the dental association, they can be much more expensive than over the counter treatments. Dental treatments can cost hundreds to thousands of dollars, whereas over the counter treatments generally stay under \$100.

Another comparison to make between dental treatments and over the counter treatments is time. No one method will cause your teeth to become whiter and stay whiter forever, but the effects from dental treatments do last longer. They also take less time to see results, for those who need quicker results.

Causes of Teeth Discoloration

Teeth can be very sensitive organs. Many teeth whitening products act on the enamel, which is the outer layer of the tooth. This in most people's mouths is a somewhat thin layer. Protected by the enamel is the dentine, which is the main part of the tooth. Under the dentine is the bone root. Too much damage to the enamel exposes the dentine, causing greyish areas on your teeth and tooth sensitivity. This can also make you more likely to have cavities, which can also be considered ugly in your mouth.

Enamel is porous as well, which means materials can work their way into and stain the enamel layer. Your mouth naturally forms a thin protective layer over your tooth enamel, as well, but this layer is easily broken down with heat, cold, or sustained contact by sugars or other sticky foods, as food sugars also form a layer on top of your teeth as you chew.

If you are trying to whiten your teeth, you should probably stop doing the things that are causing them to darken. One cause of teeth discoloration is aging, which unfortunately cannot be stopped. A more serious cause is illness or disease, which is why you should visit your dentist or doctor regularly to ensure you are staying healthy. Most tooth discoloration is harmless, but many don't really like yellow teeth. Commonly blamed drinks are coffee, teas, and red wines. These, as well as colored sodas contain dyes which stain your teeth as they go past. A little bit cannot have very much effect, but as people often drink these drinks daily, over the long term, an effect is seen. Tartar buildup on the teeth can also cause surface staining.

Another commonly blamed cause of teeth yellowing is nicotine and tar from cigarette smoking. Chewing tobacco will also cause a lot of tooth staining.

Some causes of teeth discoloration you cannot do anything about. Some people naturally have more yellow or more grey teeth. Also there can be congenital discoloration. As well, some antibiotics can cause tooth discoloration, such as tetracycline use. Tetracycline can also cause tooth discoloration if a mother uses this antibiotic during pregnancy, her child could end up with tooth discoloration.

The method you choose to whiten your teeth should be based on tooth safety, as well as on what caused the discoloration of your teeth.

How Foods Affect Our Teeth

Foods that cause staining or discoloration

Foods and beverages cause stains on our teeth by sticking to the protective layer of protein that our mouths naturally coat our tooth enamel in to prevent damage to the enamel layer. Obvious culprits include berries, curries, red wine, colored soda drinks, and soya sauce, which easily stain your tooth enamel. Sticky foods also adhere more easily to tooth enamel, causing a layer of stain over top of your tooth, and allowing other foods and drinks to stick to this layer. Regular brushing can avoid this thin layer of fuzziness on top of our teeth.

Another cause of tooth staining and thus discoloration is extreme temperatures. Hot drinks and cold drinks such as coffee, tea, or iced drinks can cause teeth to expand and contract slightly, which allows stains to penetrate the protective layer more easily, as well as causing the pores in the tooth enamel to open and close, and stains to penetrate the tooth enamel. This is very staining, especially since the color in coffee is staining as well.

The stains caused can end up being inside our tooth enamel, rather than just on top.

Another type of food that increases tooth staining is acidic foods.

If you eat or drink foods or drinks which cause tooth enamel staining, try to brush your teeth after each meal or snack.

Foods that help remove or lessen teeth staining

Certain foods can actually help protect your teeth from tooth staining, or help remove some of the yellowing. Green leafy vegetables such as spinach and broccoli, besides being good for your diet and full of nutrients, contain phytochemicals which add a layer of protection to teeth. Just watch out for the spinach caught between your teeth before you go out!

Crunchy foods can also help your teeth look better. The act of eating and chewing crunchy foods help remove stains on teeth through friction, while also being healthy for you and not causing any tooth staining. Crunchy foods such as celery, carrots, and apples can do this.

Water

It is difficult to brush or floss after every meal, so as a substitute, you can rinse your mouth with water. Try chasing your meal or snack with a glass of water, or gargle with water. A quick flush through your teeth works well, as well. Close your teeth and let the water be pushed through your teeth.

Teeth Bleaching in the Dentist's Office

Your dentist may suggest that you could bleach your teeth. This process changes the actual color of your tooth enamel, rather than just acting on the surface of your teeth. This is only for those who have yellowing or discoloration on their teeth from natural causes, and will not work for those who have had fillings or bonds done on their front teeth. This procedure may not work as well if your tooth discoloration is brownish or greyish – this works best on teeth which have gone yellowish.

For those who have had work done on their front teeth, and that work has discolored, you may want to ask about applying a porcelain veneer, or some other way of whitening that part of your teeth, or after the bleaching, you will have very white teeth, and large brownish or yellowish blocks wherever the filling or other work was. Your dentist can prescribe you a home

based bleaching program that you can do in the comfort of your home quite easily. Some of these products are also available as over the counter products, although you should always ask your dentist's advice first.

Bleaching can also be done by your dentist in your dentist's office. This is called in-chair bleaching, probably because all you do is sit in the dentist's chair for 30 minutes or up to an hour while bleach sits on your teeth. You may need to go more than once.

There are many different possible bleaching agents your dentist could use. Be sure and ask the dentist which one they plan on using, and if it has been approved by your country's dental association. The bleaching agent is usually a form of peroxide, either carbamide or hydrogen peroxide, and while it is sitting on your teeth, it breaks down, releasing oxygen, which goes into your enamel and whitens your teeth.

The dentist will use something to protect your gums and the soft tissue in your mouth from the bleaching agent. Either they will apply a soft gel to your gums, or they will use a rubber shield to cover and protect the rest of your mouth. They will then apply the bleaching agent to your front teeth. The dentist may also use a bleaching paste, which they will apply and remove several times in succession.

Bleaching treatments may weaken your tooth enamel. This can be mitigated by fluoride treatments which your dentist may add to the whitening paste or gel.

The effects of bleaching may not last forever. New layers of staining can build up over the newly whitened teeth. You should be sure to follow up the bleaching by carefully following your dentist's recommendations for keeping your teeth white and pearly.

Laser Treatments in the Dentist's Office

A new method, which has yet to have been approved by the American Dental Association yet has been approved by the FDA, is laser whitening of teeth. This is the most expensive of the possible treatments for removing stains on the teeth, yet may, for some people, be the best option. Before getting the treatment, get a written quote on the cost.

Laser whitening treatments are done in conjunction with in chair bleaching. After you have determined that laser whitening treatment is for you, the dentist will take about an hour to do the procedure. As in dentist office bleaching treatment, the dentist will place a shield of some form over your gums to protect them. He or she will then apply a paste or gel of a bleaching agent.

Then a special light is shone onto the teeth. This light is designed to speed up the chemical reaction that is the breakdown of the carbamide or hydrogen peroxide, thus making more oxygen enter into the enamel. The laser is pointed at a few teeth at a time and for a limited amount of time per tooth. Usually, a laser whitening procedure can make your teeth five to six shades whiter than the bleaching treatment alone can.

The effects of laser whitening can last up to three years, depending on if you smoke, drink red wine, or eat or drink other things which stain your teeth.

Some concerns with laser whitening include people feeling like their teeth are sensitive to cold after the treatment, as well as some gum irritation and discoloration (white marks on the gumline). These sensations are temporary and should go away shortly.

Teeth Whitening Strips

A newer product available to help people have whiter teeth is teeth whitening strips. These almost invisible strips are applied to the teeth with a minimum of discomfort, twice daily for 30 minutes each time. Despite what you see on commercials, you probably want to do these at home in the morning and at night.

These can be used in combination with whitening toothpastes, and in fact can be found sold in kits with whitening toothpastes, for your convenience. Tooth whitening strips can whiten your teeth up to 3 or 4 shades, in one to 4 weeks. You will usually see some results a few days after starting. Results can last up to 4 months. Tooth whitening strips are fairly simple to use as well.

A concern with tooth whitening strips is that you will end up with inconsistently whitened teeth. This can be mitigated by careful application of the strips, as well as brushing regularly with the whitening toothpaste. Flossing well, right before or right after brushing can help.

Before applying the strips, rinse your mouth out well with cool water, then follow the directions on the strip package to ensure the most successful experience.

The main advantage to using these over these counter whitening products is the price – kits which contain strips with peroxide gels on them often cost \$15 - \$60, where dentist office procedures can run in the thousands. A disadvantage, besides the potential for inconsistent results, is that irritation of the gums can occur. Gum irritation should go away, but can be treated with gels for gum irritation if they don't or if it is more than minimal irritation.

Teeth Whitening Gels

Clear bleaching gels are available over the counter in many pharmacies and drugstores.

These peroxide based gels are applied by you to your teeth with a small brush twice a day for 2 weeks. If you use these, be especially careful not to get any of the gel on your teeth, as this will cause gum irritation. You will usually see results in a few days, and after the treatment period, the results will often last as long as four months. It is also important to be careful to apply evenly, as otherwise, you can have inconsistent whitening which you may not notice until a week has passed. These products are priced about the same range as the whitening strips.

Tray Based Teeth Bleaching Solutions

One type of product that is available for in home tooth whitening treatment is a tooth bleaching solution. You can get a kit for this through your dentist or over the counter from a pharmacy or drugstore.

Bleaching solutions often contain a kind of peroxide, which actually bleaches the enamel layer of the tooth – it doesn't just remove the stain on the surface of the tooth, it changes and brightens the color of the tooth itself. This can be disturbing if you have a bond or a white filling in a tooth, as these become more obvious against your newly brightened teeth.

The peroxide commonly used in these solutions is not the same as the peroxide you may have at home, hydrogen peroxide. The bleaching agent in these solutions is a carbamide peroxide, which is a form of hydrogen peroxide. This is available in several different concentrations. It may be best to obtain the whitening kit from your dentist, if possible. If not, try to choose a bleaching solution that contains 10% carbamide peroxide. The kits available from the dentist are the only ones that have received a seal of approval from the American Dental Association.

To do the home based bleaching, you will need a mouth guard style tray that the gel is placed in. You can get a custom made tray made for you at your dentist's office, or choose a kit that comes with a tray. Some of the over the counter tray based systems come with a somewhat customizable tray, which can be an advantage as a tray that fits your teeth better will prevent gum irritation.

Squirt or spread the gel into the mouth guard, and apply carefully to your teeth. Some teeth whitening kits require you to do this a couple of times a day for up to a fortnight, and will have instructions on how long to leave the trays in your mouth for. Other bleaching kits require you to put the trays in overnight for between one and two weeks.

You may need to do these treatments for longer in order for them to have an effect, for example if your tooth discoloration originates from smoking.

Be careful not to let the solution touch the soft tissue in the sides of your mouth and your gums. This will cause irritation, and can happen if your mouth tray doesn't fit properly. Talk to your dentist if this becomes a concern for you.

One other side effect you may need to discuss with your dentist is teeth sensitivity.

During, and perhaps after the treatment period, you might feel an increase in tooth sensitivity to hot and cold. This is quite common but should still be noted and mentioned to your dentist, especially if it does not diminish soon after you stop the treatment. This sensitivity should eventually go away. If sensitivity begins soon after you start the treatment, decrease the frequency of the treatments – instead of twice per day, try once per day, or overnight treatments can be done every second night.

Even after bleaching, your teeth can still yellow. Keep your pearly white smile by maintaining good dental hygiene, but avoid using another abrasive or bleaching treatment for several

months after, as you do not want to increase tooth sensitivity. Avoid foods that cause tooth discoloration, and brush and floss regularly.

How Toothpastes Can Help Teeth Whitening

There are a wide range of toothpastes available, and regular brushing with any toothpaste will help remove surface stains, as most toothpastes contain mild abrasives that allow you to scrub away any substances causing yellowing. There are also a number of whitening toothpastes. These, besides the regular effects from the normal abrasives as well as just keeping your teeth clean, can whiten your teeth more. This is because whitening toothpastes contain extra chemicals or special polishing agents that allow them to remove more of stains.

Whitening toothpastes do not actually change the color of your teeth – many people think that their tooth color will actually change. What whitening toothpaste does is scrub away the surface stains so that the original tooth color can be seen. Whitening toothpastes take the longest to have an effect out of all the possible treatments.

It can take up to a month to have a noticeable effect on tooth discoloration from a whitening toothpaste, or longer depending on the source of your tooth discoloration.

While they do not have as dramatic an effect on your teeth, long term use of a whitening toothpaste approved by your country's dental association, may be the safest and most cost effective method of whitening your teeth. Heck, you have to buy toothpaste any way, you might as well buy a whitening one.

Some whitening toothpastes actually contain bleaching agents, however, the effect from these can be limited because toothpaste is not on your teeth for very long at one time. You might improve the efficacy of the whitening agent by keeping the toothpaste on for longer, however, this can cause gum irritation from the chemicals if done too often or for too long.

After any teeth whitening procedure, such as tray based bleaching, brushing regularly and gently every day with a fluoride based toothpaste or a fluoride containing toothpaste can help to strengthen enamel.

Home Remedies for Teeth Whitening

There are a variety of home remedies suggested by people to whiten your teeth with varying degrees of success. Most of these remedies can help in the short term, using ingredients you have at home, such as baking soda, vinegar, lemon juice, and salt. If you are careful, these can help you to keep your teeth looking whiter.

Many teeth whitening processes involve rubbing your teeth with abrasive materials, but you want to avoid rubbing them too much, because if you rub off the top layer of your teeth, the tooth enamel, your dentine layer will be exposed. This is harmful to your teeth as well as making your teeth look grey-ish. Use caution and a soft bristle brush with home-made teeth whitening attempts.

Here are a few things you could try (not all at once!):

1. Lemon Juice (either from a bottle or from a lemon) mixed with a bit of table salt. In a small cup, mix the cupful of lemon juice with two to three very small spoonfuls of salt. Dip your toothbrush in and gently rub. Rinse mouth with water. Do not apply salt directly to the brush. Do this once every second day for up to 5 times. After doing this, brush your teeth with toothpaste – acids can actually cause tooth staining if left on the teeth.
2. Try fruit! Rub a strawberry on your front teeth before brushing your teeth with regular or whitening toothpaste.
3. Baking soda. Mix fresh baking soda with some cold water and gently rub teeth with the mixture. Use the flat part of your finger or a soft bristle toothbrush dipped into the baking soda to apply the baking soda to your front teeth. Do not rub vigorously or with a hard toothbrush. Let the baking soda sit for a couple of minutes, rubbing gently. Rinse mouth with clean water.
4. Or, try vinegar! Dip a soft toothbrush in vinegar and brush gently. Avoid excessive vinegar on your gums, the acid can make your gums feel unpleasant. Rinse mouth with water after. To get between the teeth, try dipping your floss in vinegar before flossing.
5. Make a paste of vinegar with baking soda. Mix vinegar with baking soda and apply the paste to your front teeth with your finger, rubbing gently using up and down motions. Rinse mouth with water. While rinsing, force water between teeth by closing teeth and pouring water into your mouth.
6. Some people try brushing or even rinsing their teeth with hydrogen peroxide. This may whiten your teeth, but the peroxide can damage your gums and the lining of your mouth. Also, keep in mind that the concentration of hydrogen peroxide in the bottles you can buy, and in the whitening agents you can buy, is different. If you do choose to do this, dab the peroxide on a tiny bit at a time with a cotton swab, to prevent any peroxide from touching your gums.

An important thing to remember with these methods of teeth whitening is to be patient. It will take time to remove the stains on the teeth, and it may take several weeks to see results. Don't forget to continue your normal teeth and mouth cleaning regimen as well.

What to Avoid in Teeth Whitening

Not everyone should whiten their teeth. For some people, bleaching agents can do more harm to them than the whitening is worth, and for others, bleaching agents won't help. There are

also things you should avoid doing to have a safe and successful teeth whitening experience, so you have a healthy, happy mouth.

When you shouldn't whiten your teeth

- You shouldn't whiten your teeth if you are under the age of 13.
- You shouldn't whiten your teeth with a bleaching agent if your tooth discoloration is congenital discoloration – it won't actually help
- Don't use whitening agents if your stains are from drugs, such as tetracycline. This won't help and can make your teeth very sensitive.
- Whitening agents probably won't help if you have severe dental discoloration – talk to your dentist for solutions
- If you have sensitive teeth, bleaching agents will make them more sensitive, so you should avoid chemical teeth whitening, including some of the stronger whitening toothpastes

What not to do

- Do not scratch at your teeth with something hard – many people try to scratch at their teeth with a pick or with their fingernails, thus causing damage to their enamel layer. Enamel is one of the hardest surfaces on your body, yet it can be scratched or damaged by metal or repeated scraping.
- Do not regularly use abrasives on your teeth – a regular use of stronger whitening toothpastes, or often using baking soda or salt on teeth will weaken and can damage the enamel – this can be countered a little bit by use of fluoride treatments from your dentist, or perhaps by using a fluoride toothpaste, but is better to avoid
- It is better to use a soft bristle toothbrush on your teeth than a medium or a hard bristle brush. Over time, a medium or hard bristle brush wears away more of your tooth enamel, while not actually providing more cleaning power
- Do not scrub your teeth extra hard. Many people try to scrub away their tooth stains by brushing particularly hard at them. Brushing harder will not actually improve the efficacy of brushing, but it will wear down your tooth enamel faster.
- Floss regularly but carefully. Over enthusiasm when flossing can damage gums. Your dental hygienist can show you how to floss properly.

Do not smoke or chew tobacco

- Staining from regular cigarette smoking is common and after an extended period of time, sinks more deeply into the enamel layer of the teeth. This is also true of tobacco chewing. If you do smoke, try to brush your teeth after each time you smoke. Avoid smoking in conjunction with drinking coffee, tea, or other hot drinks – the heat from the drink makes teeth more susceptible to staining.

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