

Tooth Whitening

People want whiter teeth and brighter smiles. This trend within society is evident with the growing number of whitening toothpastes, rinses, professional and over-the-counter systems, overnight kits and advertisements for teeth whitening. Having whiter teeth is associated with beauty, a healthy lifestyle and increased confidence. Talk to a dental hygienist about the different whitening options, what they do, and how to use them.

WHAT CONSUMERS SHOULD KNOW

- Tooth whitening is only effective in removing stains on natural teeth. Existing crowns, bonding, bridges, fillings or other artificial dental work will not respond to whitening agents.
- Strips do not whiten entire arches. Generally, they only cover the front teeth.
- Whitening may not be effective when teeth are seriously discoloured.
- Do not smoke or chew tobacco after using whitening products.
- Those who have tooth decay, gum disease, enamel erosion or hypersensitivity are advised not to use whitening products.
- Tooth whitening is a chemical procedure and as such may cause some temporary reactions, such as sore gums or teeth, which usually resolve when treatment is discontinued.

CAUSES FOR TEETH TO BECOME STAINED

- Age
- Smoking or chewing tobacco
- Coffee, tea and red wine
- Antibiotics, such as tetracycline
- Dental fluorosis – swallowing too much fluoride

WHITENING TREATMENTS

The treatments and their effectiveness vary depending on the type of whitening system. Individuals should know the condition of their teeth and oral tissues. A thorough examination and cleaning from a dental professional is recommended before using whitening products.



Whitening toothpastes

Although some toothpastes claim to remove surface stains, it would take a long time to see any real effect of a whitening toothpaste because chemicals are only in contact with the teeth for a short period of time and they are diluted with saliva and water.

Home kits

Most home kits produce modest results at best. There are many ways to whiten teeth using self-application whitening kits, including strips, gels and even tray-based systems. All of these methods will whiten enamel somewhat, but, if applied improperly or too often, they could also irritate the gums and erode tooth enamel, especially if solutions contain acid. It is important to read the label and follow instructions carefully.

Professional whitening

Dental professionals apply a stronger solution of hydrogen peroxide than home whitening kits, and sometimes may use a special light to hasten tooth whitening. A customized mouthguard will help protect the gums. This is probably the safest and most effective way to whiten. Lasers are sometimes used to enhance the action of whitening agents. Professional whitening is more expensive than over-the-counter products and systems. According to clinical studies, 96 per cent of those who used whitening products to remove tobacco and beverage stains experienced

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some lightening effect. For other types of stains, such as those produced by tetracycline or too much fluoride (fluorosis), the response to whitening was less reliable.

Does the effect last?

The whiter gleam will start to fade within a month, even sooner depending on factors such as coffee/red wine consumption or eating food that stains teeth. Smokers will quickly lose the nicer colour in their teeth.

RISK FACTORS

Whitening may temporarily increase tooth sensitivity and irritate the gums. Because of this and other potential risks, people with very sensitive teeth or gum disease, cavities or worn tooth enamel should not whiten their teeth. People with grayish discolourations, prior bonding or certain types of fillings in their front teeth are not good candidates for whitening. Cavities should be filled before whitening. Otherwise, the whitener can penetrate cavities and cause pain.

Tooth whitening products are not recommended for people with peroxide allergy, pregnant women or women who are breast feeding. Since children have more sensitive teeth than adults, they should not consider whitening until the tooth pulp is fully formed. Consult with a dental professional.

In addition, individuals may experience:

- Tissue irritation as a result of ill-fitting trays and/or chemical sensitivity.
- Receding gums.
- Damage to restorations.
- Sensitivity to hot and cold due to high concentrations of hydrogen peroxide.

- Sore gums from improper application or overuse of product.
- Tooth enamel erosion from using too much over-the-counter home whitening products, especially those that contain acid.
- With long-term use of whitening products, natural teeth that are close to a silver (amalgam) filling may take on a greenish tinge.
- Allergic reaction to the product's chemical solution.

TIPS FOR SAFE WHITENING

- Clean whitening trays with a toothbrush and cold water.
- Keep trays in the tray holder and store in a cool, dry place away from heat and direct sunlight.
- Whitening gels can be refrigerated (not frozen) for long-term storage.
- Read and follow the individual manufacturers' instructions.
- If significant tooth sensitivity or gum irritations develop, reduce application to every other day. Stop using the product if problems persist.
- If teeth are sensitive after whitening, use a fluoride-based gel or toothpaste for sensitive teeth.
- Do not swallow plastic strips.
- Whitening gel can cause skin irritation. Wash hands with soap and water after applying whitening strips.
- Do not get gel in the eyes.
- Do not eat, drink, smoke or sleep while wearing a whitening strip.
- Keep whitening gel away from leather and fabrics.



As professional health-care providers, dental hygienists are primarily concerned with promoting good oral health. Dental hygiene is among the largest of the regulated healthcare professions in the province. In Ontario all dental hygienists are registered with the College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario, which regulates the profession to ensure the public receives safe and ongoing comprehensive oral care.

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