

Teeth Whitening

Fact Sheet

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Your wedding is coming up and you want your smile to be its brightest. Or maybe you have an important speaking engagement. Whatever the reason, bleaching isn't just for the movie stars. Many people have had their teeth bleached, and millions more are thinking about it. The desire for a brighter smile with whiter teeth is very strong, and tooth bleaching safely lightens the color of the teeth, lasting for up to five years. The most effective and safest method of tooth bleaching is dentist-supervised.

Is bleaching for you?

Generally, bleaching is successful in 90 percent of patients, though it may not be an option for everyone. Pregnant women will want to inquire with their dentist and physician before treatment begins. Consider tooth bleaching if your teeth are darkened from age, coffee, tea or smoking. Teeth darkened with the color of yellow, brown or orange respond better to lightening. Other types of gray stains caused by fluorosis, smoking or tetracycline are lightened, but results are not as dramatic and may require significantly longer treatment for the desired results. If you have very sensitive teeth, periodontal disease, or teeth with worn enamel, your dentist may discourage bleaching.

What's involved?

First, the dentist will determine whether you are a candidate for tooth bleaching and what type of bleaching system would provide the best results.

If you're in a hurry for whiter teeth, you may decide to have your teeth lightened immediately. However, most patients choose dentist-supervised at-home bleaching, which is more economical and provides the same results.

With the at-home method, your first appointment will include having impressions of your teeth made to fabricate a mouthguard appliance for you. The mouthguard is custom made for your mouth and is lightweight so that it can be worn comfortably while you are awake or sleeping. The mouthguard is so thin that you should even be able to talk and work while wearing it. Along with the mouthguard, you'll receive the bleaching materials and will be given instructions on how to use them.

Some bleaching systems recommend bleaching your teeth from two to four hours a day. Generally this type of system requires three to six weeks to complete, and works best on patients with sensitive teeth. Other systems recommend bleaching at night while you sleep. This type of system usually requires only 7-14 days to complete.

How long does it last?

Lightness should last from one to five years, depending on your personal habits such as smoking and drinking coffee and tea. At this point you may choose to get a touch up. This procedure may not be as costly because you can probably still use the same mouthguard. The re-treatment time also is much shorter than the original treatment time.

How does it work?

The active ingredient in all of the whitening agents is a form of peroxide, either concentrated hydrogen peroxide or carbamide peroxide, varying in strengths. When water contacts this white crystal, the release of hydrogen peroxide lightens the teeth.

Is bleaching safe? Any side effects?

Several studies, during the past five years, have proven bleaching to be safe and effective. The American Dental Association has granted its seal of approval to some tooth bleaching products. Some patients may experience slight gum irritation or tooth sensitivity, which will resolve when the treatment ends. If bleaching at home, it is important to follow the instructions on the kit. If you experience pain or increased sensitivity, stop using the product and call your dentist.

What are realistic expectations?

No one can really predict how much lighter your teeth will become. Every case is different. Typically, there is a two-shade improvement as seen on a dentist's shade guide. The success rate depends upon the type of stain involved and your compliance. Bleaching can only provide a shift in color from gray to a lighter shade of gray, for example. Bleaching does not lighten artificial materials such as resins, silicants, or porcelains.

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