

Brighten Up Your Smile

By Thomas Jackson, DDS

Cosmetic dental procedures are becoming more popular as people realize that brightening their smile helps create an image of youthful beauty. Many procedures and options are used by dentists to enhance a smile, but the quickest method is through dental whitening (bleaching). Below are some of the most frequently asked questions regarding dental bleaching.

What bleaching methods are used?

In general there are two options: over-the-counter products and professionally prescribed treatments. Over-the-counter options include either whitening toothpastes or low-strength, peroxide-based gels and strips. Whitening toothpastes are often more abrasive than regular toothpastes and rely on surface stain removal to keep the teeth looking bright. These toothpastes are most beneficial in maintaining previously whitened teeth. Strips and gels will slowly bleach discolorations out of the teeth, but due to their relatively weak formulation, they must be used for a much greater length of time to reach the desired result.

Professionally prescribed products include in-office treatment and at-home tray systems. All in-office systems use a high concentration of hydrogen peroxide. The lips, gums, and cheeks are isolated so that only the teeth are exposed to the material. Recent research suggests that a light (laser) does not seem to influence the bleaching effectiveness. The total bleaching time is between 45 and 60 minutes. Most in-office systems recommend additional at-home bleaching products as a follow-up to achieve superior results.

At-home tray systems typically use a carbamide peroxide gel to bleach the teeth. The concentration is less than in-office solutions but far greater than over-the-counter products. Your dentist will make molds of your teeth, then fabricate custom-fitted trays that hold the bleach next to the teeth. This is a very effective

method of whitening and will usually take several weeks to achieve the desired results.

Is teeth whitening safe?

Yes. Some bleaching products dispensed through dentists' offices as well as professionally applied (in-office) treatments have received the American Dental Association Seal of Acceptance. These products have shown no long-term adverse effect on the body or the teeth. Professionally prescribed bleaching will not make the enamel weaker. Some individuals report tooth sensitivity and/or gum irritation, but these are both transient effects and will cease upon the discontinuation of bleaching.

How much lighter will my teeth get?

The amount of color change will vary depending on the condition of the teeth, the nature of the stain, and the type of bleaching system used and for how long. A full course of professionally supervised bleaching will typically lighten the teeth approximately 10 shades.

How long do the results last?

Whitening is not permanent. Individuals who expose their teeth to foods and beverages that cause staining may see the whiteness start to fade in as little as one month. Those who avoid products like coffee, tea, tobacco, red wine, and other stain-producing substances may be able to wait one year or longer before another whitening treatment or touch-up is needed. The advantage of having custom at-home trays is that touch-up procedures can be done periodically to keep the teeth their whitest.

Am I a candidate for bleaching?

Most people can bleach safely and achieve desirable, long-lasting results. Bleaching is not recommended for children under 16, pregnant or nursing women, or anyone with a known allergy to peroxide. A careful exam from your dentist to diagnose and treat gum disease and dental decay should precede any bleaching procedures. Special consideration must be

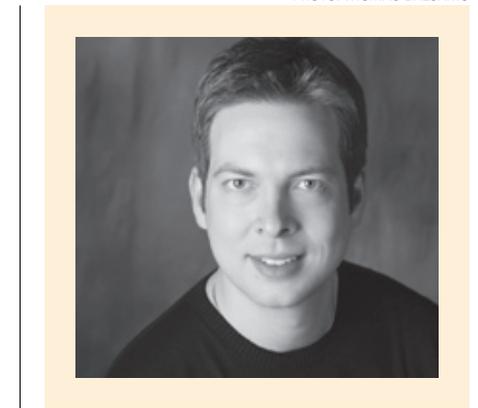


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given to individuals with tooth-colored bonded fillings or porcelain materials used in dental restorations, as they will not whiten. If a whitening agent is used on teeth that contain these restorations, the result is uneven whitening.

Individuals with numerous restorations may be better off considering bonding, veneers, or crowns rather than whitening. Also, yellowish-colored teeth respond well to bleaching, while brownish-colored teeth respond less well, and grayish or purple-stained teeth may not respond at all. Blue-gray staining caused by tetracycline is the most difficult to lighten and may require veneers or crowns.

What is the cost?

Professionally prescribed treatment will range from approximately \$600 to \$900 for either the in-office power bleaching or at-home bleaching trays. Over-the-counter products can start at as little as \$20. 