

# Getting whiter teeth



**D**entists have a number of options for helping bring a whiter smile forward.

## TYPES OF STAINS

There are 2 types of stains: extrinsic and intrinsic.<sup>1</sup>

Extrinsic stains discolor the surface of the tooth over time. They develop by repeated exposure to the same types of foods or beverages that would stain your clothes. Drinks like coffee, tea, and red wine are the most common culprits. Smoking, also can make your teeth yellow or even brownish.

Intrinsic stains occur under the hard, outer surface of your teeth, called enamel. They may appear as you age when the enamel may become thinner, allowing the yellowish dentin to show through. Other causes of intrinsic stains are things that affect the whole tooth, like an injury.

## OPTIONS FOR WHITENING

There are many choices for whitening: over-the-counter products, dentist-dispensed trays and in-office treatments.

### Over-the-counter options

There are a number of whitening products on store shelves. The most common are toothpastes or whitening strips. Many whitening toothpastes scrub stains from your teeth. Some also may contain low levels of peroxide, a chemical that helps lighten teeth. Many can be used every time you brush. Whitening strips have a thin layer of peroxide-containing gel that can be applied directly to your teeth. Whitening strips typically involve leaving the strip on for a few hours a day over the course of 1 through 2 weeks. As with all dental products, look for the American Dental Association (ADA) Seal of Acceptance, which shows that they meet standards for both safety and effectiveness.

### Trays dispensed by the dentist

Your dentist can make a tray that you coat with a whitening gel and wear for a few hours, usually overnight. You'll wear this tray for a few nights before seeing results. Because the amount of peroxide in this gel is greater than that of over-the-counter products, your teeth may brighten faster.

### In-office procedures

In-office procedures also rely on peroxide, but the gel applied contains a stronger level of peroxide than that used in the at-home versions. The dentist applies a gel, and then may use a

light to speed up a chemical reaction to whiten the teeth. This is the most expensive approach, but it can often be done in just a single office visit and usually offers the most noticeable results.<sup>1</sup>

## SIDE EFFECTS ASSOCIATED WITH BLEACHING

When peroxide is used, whether it is in strips or gels, the whitening process is often referred to as bleaching. Bleaching relies on a chemical reaction to lighten the color of your teeth rather than just removing surface stains.

Beyond lightening your teeth, bleaching can have some unintended effects, like sensitive teeth or irritated gums.<sup>1</sup> The level of peroxide in the gel seems to determine the extent of the effect—more peroxide may lead to more intense effects. The good news is, these side effects are usually temporary.

## TALK TO YOUR DENTIST

You can talk to your dentist about the look you want to achieve and how much time and money you would like to invest in the process. He or she can also fill you in on limitations. For example, some stains may not be removable. And tooth-colored fillings or dental crowns will not bleach at all, so you might not achieve an even whitening.

## CONCLUSIONS

Depending on how bright you would like your smile to be and the amount of time and money you are willing to invest, you have a number of choices for whitening your teeth. ■

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adaj.2020.07.019>

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**Disclosure.** Ms. Mark did not report any disclosures.

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1. Rodríguez-Martínez J, Valiente M, Sánchez-Martín MJ. Tooth whitening: from the established treatments to novel approaches to prevent side effects. *J Esthet Restor Dent.* 2019;31(5):431-440.