

Bleaching

What is bleaching?

Bleaching or whitening the teeth is a popular cosmetic dentistry procedure that helps patients with discolored or darkened teeth to have whiter, brighter smiles. Bleaching is a process of lightening the teeth and can be done at home or in the dentist's office. The procedure dates back to the 1980s and became increasingly popular in the 1990s. Bleaching uses peroxide that is applied to the teeth for a period of time. There are many different types of peroxide on the market, and one of the most commonly used is a gel. It is important for a patient to be diagnosed by a dentist who can determine if bleaching is recommended.

Is bleaching effective?

Bleaching takes some elements of the proteins out of the enamel and whitens the teeth. In most cases, bleaching generates good results. Individuals with yellowish teeth will have better results than patients whose teeth are gray or blue in color. Bleaching is not for everyone. For example, it won't work on individuals with porcelain fillings or crowns because bleaching isn't effective on man-made products. In this situation, the natural teeth will lighten and not blend with the existing fillings or crowns.

Why do teeth become discolored?

Teeth may become discolored as a result of poor hygiene, use of tobacco, hereditary factors, systemic diseases, medications and substances found in coffee or tea. Those who grind the teeth may also have discolored teeth. The color of teeth along the gumline is often yellow and dark, but lighter along the edge. Individuals who grind their teeth wear away the lighter edge -- leaving the darker portion of the tooth. Some medications may also discolor teeth or produce white spots on the enamel.

What types of bleaching methods are available?

There are two bleaching systems available for consumers. They include power bleaching, which is done by the dentist in the office, and the home bleaching system, which the patient does on his or her own at home. In either case, a Dentist must supervise the process. If bleaching is recommended, the dentist and patient must decide which system would work the best. Some dentists take photos prior to bleaching and use a shade guide to determine the desired color.

Here is a look at both methods:

- Power bleaching is a procedure that is done in one office visit and it takes one to three hours. The teeth are bleached in one session using a high concentration of peroxide. The dentist will apply a rubber dam or wax to the gums to protect them. The bleaching substance is applied to the teeth and a strong light may be used to accelerate the process. This system is for the patient who wants immediate results and doesn't want to do it at home. Higher concentrations of peroxide are used for this method and may cause sensitivity to the teeth. If this happens, the dentist may opt to slow down the bleaching process or use a fluoride solution to reduce sensitivity.
- Home bleaching is a procedure that a patient does at home, primarily at night. The dentist makes special trays that fit over the teeth to hold the solution on the teeth. The patient puts peroxide in the special trays and wears them for up to eight hours at a time. Most of the lightening occurs during the first two hours, but the bleaching process continues as long as the patient wears the trays. The entire process may take from two to six weeks. A dentist should monitor the process once a week. The disadvantages of this system is that it takes longer and the patients has to be disciplined to do it at home.

Are over-the-counter bleaching products effective?

The Chicago Dental Society recommends that individuals who opt to alter the color of their teeth via bleaching consult a dentist. Over-the-counter bleaching systems may not be safe and there is potential for damage because of the lack of supervision. Toothpastes with whiteners are not effective because they do not contain a high enough level of chemicals to make any difference. Tooth polishes have abrasives in them that are not good for the teeth.