

# Talking with Patients

## Over-the-Counter Tooth Whitening

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### WHAT IS IT?

Following the introduction of home-applied whitening products in the late 1980s, tooth whitening has become increasingly popular. Patients can receive a variety of effective whitening treatments from their dentist. However, many whitening products currently are also available over the counter (OTC) in drug stores, department stores, and on-line in the World Wide Web.

OTC tooth whitening is self-administered tooth whitening; no professional supervision is involved at any stage of the procedure. OTC whitening kits are heavily advertised in magazines and television commercials. These products are generally marketed directly to consumers and cost less than professional whitening treatment from a dentist. OTC tooth-whitening kits are available in many forms: whitening strips, whitening gels, mouthrinses, and paint-on liquids or varnishes. However, some products are safer and more effective than others. Patients should ask their dentists which OTC products are recommended.

### IS IT SAFE AND EFFECTIVE?

The active ingredient in most OTC whitening products is hydrogen or

carbamide peroxide, as in professional whitening products used by dentists. However, it is important to make a distinction between self-administered whitening and dentist-supervised whitening procedures. First, not all dental discolorations can be treated successfully with whitening techniques. Patients who have no fillings in their front teeth and whose teeth have yellow stains are best suited for using OTC whitening products. However, only your dentist can make a definitive diagnosis and determine if a whitening procedure is indicated. Second, professional whitening procedures offered by your dentist are generally faster and can bleach more teeth at once than can most OTC products. Finally, dentist-supervised bleaching offers greater

control of the procedure than do OTC products; therefore, tooth sensitivity, tissue irritation, and other problems can be better prevented or treated.

### CONCLUSIONS

OTC tooth-whitening products are peroxide-based products available directly to consumers. Although most products cost less than treatment by a dentist and have the potential to produce tooth whitening, some are better than others with regard to safety and efficacy. It is best to ask your dentist which OTC whitening products are recommended.

The following picture shows examples of two popular OTC whitening kits.



Figure 1