

Talking with Patients

Tooth Whitening: Why, Who, Where, What, and How

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WHY?

An attractive smile can be an important enhancement to your life. If you don't like the color of your teeth, you can change it. Before attempting to whiten your teeth, be sure to see your dentist. A dental examination will determine that your teeth and gums are healthy, and help you understand the effect whiteners may have on your other dental work.

WHO?

Tooth whitening has become one of the most requested dental procedures for patients of all ages. Dentist-dispensed tooth whitening provides the most effective way to brighten the smile. Teeth with yellow tones show the best results from whitening. Even the grey shades of tetracycline staining can be lightened.

WHERE?

Whitening agents are placed in a mouth guard which the patient wears at home for several hours each day. Teeth can also be whitened in the dental office using higher concentrations of the whitening agent. This in-office approach can start the procedure and provide some immediate lightening. Additional at home whitening treatments may be needed for some patients.

WHAT?

In-office whiteners use high concentration (15–50% hydrogen peroxide) agents while the at-home products use a lower level of carbamide peroxide (10–15%). Both systems whiten the teeth from 5 to 12 shades.

HOW?

In-office whiteners usually take about 1–3 hours; the advantage is that the result is immediate, but, they are often more expensive. The at-home whiteners will show results after about 5–7 days and are recommended for use for 2 weeks. Any whitener may require a touch-up every couple of months depending on your eating and brushing habits and the natural color of your teeth.

The concentration of the agent, the length of application, and the natural shade of your teeth will determine how quickly your teeth will lighten. There has been considerable attention to so-called “laser” bleaching done in the dental office. One study showed that the light had little or no effect on the whitening of the teeth. Variables that affect the whitening of teeth are the concentration of the bleaching agent and the length of time the whitening agent is in contact with the teeth.

DR NIESSEN'S TOP 10 LIST OF STAIN-CAUSING FOODS

1. coffee or tea (hot or cold)
2. tobacco-cigarettes, spit tobacco or cigars
3. red wine
4. grape juice
5. cola drinks
6. root beer soft drinks
7. berries or cherries
8. soy sauce
9. artificially colored foods
10. curried foods

CAUTIONS

Whiteners, especially those in high concentrations, can cause a temporary sensitivity to the teeth and gums. A desensitizing agent provided by your dentist can help. Discontinuing use of the agent for a day or two can also stop the sensitivity.

SPECIAL NOTE

The whitening procedure will *not* change the color of tooth-colored fillings, so they may look darker than after the procedure. Also, dentists usually recommend whitening the teeth prior to the placement of veneers to change the color or position of front teeth.

CONCLUSION

Talk to your dentist about the many options available to improve the color of your teeth, and to insure that your gums and other structures are healthy prior to starting any procedure.

HOW DO YOU MEASURE WHITENING EFFECTS?

Studies of the effectiveness of whitening agents have reported improvements in the color of teeth from 5-12 shades. What does this mean? Tooth shades are measured using a “Value-oriented shade guide.” At the start, the dentist or hygienist will compare the color of your incisor teeth and your canine teeth (which are usually darker than the incisors) with the shade guide and record it. After the whitening procedure, the shade will again be recorded. How many shades the

teeth lighten determines the improvement. The left view shows a patient at the beginning of a tooth whitening procedure. The teeth are determined to be Shade C-3. After the whitening procedure, the shade is again taken. Compare this to the patient’s teeth after the procedure with the starting color tab (C-3). Notice how the teeth have lightened to approximately C-2 on the shade guide, a 5-shade improvement in the tooth color using this value-oriented shade guide.

If your teeth are fairly light to start with, for example Shade A2 or B2, you may see only 3–5 shades of improvement. This isn’t bad. It just means you started at a higher point on the scale. If you really want to see the whitening effects, first whiten your top teeth only. After you will see a difference between the top and bottom teeth, then whiten the lower teeth.



Shade guide.



Before whitening.



After whitening.

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