



# WHITE LIGHTENING

When it comes to a bright smile, many consumers today look for “lightning in a bottle”—that one tooth whitener that removes stains and returns a smile to its former undimmed and shining glory. The search for this lost smile has created a growing market of tooth-whitening products and techniques, from common whitening toothpastes available in supermarkets, to over-the-counter gels and strips found in drugstores, to dental office methods that involve special solutions and equipment.

As we age, it is natural for teeth to lose some of their original luster, but certain foods, beverages, and, of course, tobacco use can significantly increase discoloration and dental staining, dimming what were once pearly whites. The first step toward a brighter smile could be as simple as ceasing the use of coffee, tea, caramel-colored soda, and tobacco. If giving these up seems unlikely or unsatisfactory, one might consider a more intensive tooth-whitening regimen. As with anything that concerns oral health, the Massachusetts Dental Society recommends that individuals consult their dentist before undertaking any program of tooth whitening to ensure the safety, benefits, and results of such a course.

Probably the most common form of tooth whitening is brushing with one of the many whitening toothpastes, called dentifrices, which contain mild abrasives that remove surface stains and discolorations. A quick walk through the oral hygiene aisle of any supermarket or drugstore reveals a multitude of these pastes. With most of these products, the abrasives may clean and polish the teeth, removing stains and making teeth appear whiter.

In recent years, many over-the-counter products have appeared on pharmacy shelves, offering stronger tooth-whitening agents to the general public. For the most part, these products contain a hydrogen peroxide solution, which actually bleaches the dental surface, effectively changing the color of the tooth. It is important to note that this effect will not change the color of veneers, crowns, implants, or fillings. So, after using these products, natural teeth may not match any fillings, cosmetic, or replacement work that has been done.

The simplest over-the-counter methods are whitening rinses that can be swished over the teeth, usually for 30 to 60 seconds, twice a day, before brushing. Arguably the most popular method of at-home tooth whitening are whitening strips and dental trays, which are treated pieces of plastic that form to the teeth and are left on for about 30 minutes every day for 7 to 14 days. Still another at-home regimen uses gels that are brushed onto the tooth surface and left overnight. Some programs even include a special light that should be shined on the teeth to enhance the whitening agent. While these products are readily available to the public, some users have complained of side effects, including tooth sensitivity and irritated gums, and overuse of whitening agents could lead to stripping of the tooth enamel.

In the dental office, tooth-whitening treatments are generally a more intensive version of the peroxide bleaching technique. A dental professional will cover your gums to protect them, and then apply a peroxide solution to the teeth. He or she may also augment the bleaching by exposing the treated areas to a special light or a laser, which may facilitate the lightening process. The most common whitening treatment available through the dental office involves the fabrication of custom trays and the use of more concentrated peroxide gels, which the patient applies at home for a course of 2 to 4 weeks.

Again, while a bright, white smile may be desired, consult with your dentist before undertaking any whitening program. And remember, nothing can replace proper oral hygiene and avoidance of those bad habits that stain and undermine healthy teeth and a healthy mouth.