



Whitening: Too Much of a Good Thing?

In the last decade, tooth whitening has become one of the most requested dental procedures in the United States. In fact, a 2010 Harris Interactive poll found that, when asked if money was no object, more than half (52 percent) of those surveyed said they would choose tooth whitening over any other cosmetic makeover, including liposuction and face-lifts. That desire for a brighter and whiter smile has gone beyond the dental office and into consumers' homes, as evidenced by the more than \$1 billion spent on over-the-counter (OTC) whitening products every year, according to a June 2011 report from ABC News. But when it comes to tooth whitening, is there too much of a good thing?

Almost all whitening products will whiten teeth to a certain extent because they all contain the same active ingredient: hydrogen peroxide, a chemical that bleaches your teeth. Generally, you can either have your teeth whitened professionally by your dentist or go the do-it-yourself (DIY) route with an OTC product you administer yourself at home. If you opt for DIY whitening, you'll want to be aware of the potential risks, the most common being overuse—or as ABC News called it, becoming a “bleachorexic.”

When you have your teeth whitened in the dental office, 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 laser. Another option through your dentist involves the fabrication of custom trays and the use of more concentrated peroxide gels, which the patient applies at home.

Alternately, when you go the DIY route, you will use some type of OTC product, such as whitening strips, dental trays, brush-on gels, or whitening toothpastes or mouth rinses. The most popular methods 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.

The most effective (and safest) whitening has always been achieved by visiting your dentist. However, in recent years, many OTC products have appeared on the market, claiming to offer the same amount of whitening power as

the treatment you'd receive from your dentist. While there's certainly nothing wrong with using OTC whitening products, you want to be sure to follow the product's instructions. If the chemicals used to whiten teeth are not applied properly, they could damage soft and hard tissues in the mouth. Also, don't use whitening products too much or for too long. For example, some people may become obsessed with getting their teeth as white as possible and think it is okay to use whitening strips on a continuous basis or leave them on for twice the instructed time, when in reality, overuse of whitening agents could lead to damage to the dental pulp.

All forms of tooth whitening can have side effects, including gum irritation and sensitive teeth. These side effects are normal and usually subside once the treatment has stopped. When your teeth are whitened under a dentist's supervision, he or she will be able to detect any adverse effects the bleaching may be having on your oral health. With DIY whitening, you don't have the benefit of a dental professional looking out for your teeth, and you may be tempted to keep applying the products to get your teeth even whiter.

The issue with overusing whitening products is the continuous assault on the pulp or nerve of the tooth through any exposed dentinal or root surface by the bleaching gel. If the whitening is causing tooth sensitivity, that means that the gel is reaching the pulp somehow. In the short term, that's not really an issue and the pulp recovers, but if the whitening agents are applied on a continuous basis, then the pulp can be impacted, potentially requiring the need for root canals.

The American Dental Association (ADA) cautions consumers about the safety of tooth-whitening chemicals and procedures that are performed without the care or supervision of a licensed dentist. (It should be noted that tooth-whitening kiosks located in malls and salons do not employ licensed dentists.)

Regardless of which whitening method you choose, be sure to consult with your dentist before undertaking any whitening program. While a bright smile is certainly desirable, it's best to remember that a healthy smile is really what's important.