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The Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) is pleased to make this publication available to our member dentists as a way of communicating important oral health information to their patients.

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Your comments and suggestions regarding *WORD OF MOUTH* are always welcome. All correspondence and requests for additional copies may be sent to:

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TEETH WHITENING: FACT VS. FICTION

Nothing beats the confidence that comes with a sparkling white smile. Brushing your teeth for at least two minutes twice a day, flossing daily, and visiting your dentist regularly for checkups and cleanings will help keep your teeth clean and healthy. So will limiting foods that stain your teeth—like coffee, tea, and red wine—and not smoking or using tobacco. Exposed dentin, in addition to looking yellow, can cause sensitivity and make the tooth more prone to cavities.

Still, many people are looking for additional ways to combat stained or yellow teeth and achieve a brighter smile. From at-home whitening kits to natural ingredients found in your kitchen, there is no shortage of methods featured online and in magazines. But do they work? And are they safe?

Here's what you need to know to separate fact from fiction:

FICTION: Any tooth can be whitened.

FACT: Whiteners may not correct all types of discoloration. For example, yellow teeth will probably bleach well, brown teeth may not respond as well, and teeth with gray tones may not bleach at all. Whitening will not work on teeth with bonding, veneers, or crowns, and it won't change the color of dental fillings. It also won't be effective if the discoloration is caused by medications or a tooth injury.

FICTION: Activated charcoal scrubs will whiten your teeth.

FACT: Despite the growing popularity of health and beauty products containing activated charcoal, there is no evidence that dental products with charcoal are safe or effective for your teeth, according to the *Journal of the American Dental Association*. In fact, using materials that are too abrasive on your teeth can make them appear more yellow. Enamel is what you're aiming to whiten, but if a scrub is too rough, you can wear the enamel away. When that happens, the next layer of your tooth can become exposed—a softer, yellow tissue called dentin.

Instead, look for whitening toothpastes that have earned the American Dental Association (ADA) Seal of Acceptance for stain removal. These toothpastes have additional polishing agents that are safe for your teeth and provide stain removal effectiveness. However, unlike bleaches, these types of ADA Accepted products do not change the color of teeth because they can only remove stains on the surface.

FICTION: Swishing oils (like coconut oil) in your mouth—sometimes called oil pulling—can help whiten your teeth.

FACT: An ancient folk remedy originating in India and southern Asia, oil pulling—the practice of swishing or “pulling” plant-based oils such as coconut, sesame, and olive through the teeth and mouth for anywhere from 1–5 minutes to up to 20 minutes or longer—is believed to whiten teeth and improve oral health and overall health. However, while these oils might be great for cooking a healthy meal, there is no reliable scientific evidence to show that oil pulling whitens teeth.

FICTION: There are no at-home bleaching options approved by dentists.

FACT: With in-office bleaching, your dentist can apply bleach to whiten your teeth, usually in just one office visit. But your dentist also can provide a custom-made tray for at-home whitening, with instructions on how to place the bleaching solution in the tray and for what length of time. This may be a good option if you'd like the comfort of whitening at home at a slower pace (a few days to a few weeks), but under the guidance of your dentist. You may also see over-the-counter bleaching products sold online or in your local grocery store, such as toothpaste or whitening strips; however, the concentration of the bleaching agents in these products is generally lower than what your dentist would use in the office. If you are thinking about using one of these options, look for one with the ADA Seal of Acceptance, which means the product has been tested to be safe and effective for teeth whitening.

FICTION: There are no potential side effects from teeth whitening.

FACT: Some people who use teeth whiteners may experience tooth sensitivity. This can happen when the peroxide in the whitener gets through the enamel to the soft layer of dentin and irritates the nerve of your tooth. In most cases, the sensitivity is temporary, and the whitening treatment can be delayed and then resumed. One caution: Overuse of whiteners can damage the tooth enamel or gums, so be sure to follow directions and talk to your dentist.

THE BOTTOM LINE?

Whitening may not work for all teeth, and some methods—whether at home or at the dental office—may be better than others. Talk to your dentist about which whitening options would be safe and effective for you.