

When It Comes to Tooth Whitening, Shoppers Beware

In these modern times, the shopping mall has become more than just a place to buy a new sweater or that last-minute birthday present. Shoppers visiting malls can now do everything from mail a package, to buy a puppy, to ride a roller coaster, as well as pamper themselves by visiting hair salons, sitting in a massage chair, or getting a quick manicure or pedicure. But there's one other cosmetic procedure that's becoming more commonplace at the mall that the Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) advises is one purchase you may want to think twice about: tooth whitening.

Kiosks and stores for tooth whitening have been springing up across the nation's malls, promising whiter, brighter teeth in just 20 to 30 minutes, with a lower cost than at the dentist's office. (Tooth whitening services can also be found in other non-dental-related environments, such as health clubs and tanning salons.) The process is fairly simple: A kiosk employee fills a mouth tray with a special whitening gel, the customer places the tray in his or her own mouth, and is then seated in a reclined position in front of a special blue light that activates the gel. The cost is anywhere in the hundreds of dollars.

But is it worth it—and is it safe?

Having your teeth whitened in a mall would not necessarily be dangerous, says the MDS, but having a dentist evaluate your teeth prior to the whitening process might identify important reasons to not whiten or the presence of oral diseases that may supersede whitening.

The employees at these franchise-owned stores and kiosks are not dentists, dental hygienists, or dental assistants. They are called "tooth-whitening technicians"—all they do is direct customers as to how to insert the gel-filled tray into their own mouths and then position the light that activates the whitening gel. These stores and kiosks do not fall under the umbrella of dentistry, and this has the American Dental Association (ADA) concerned.

"The mall kiosks, unfortunately, are not regulated," says Dr. Matthew J. Messina, an Ohio-based dentist and consumer advisor for the ADA. "They are operating outside of the dental practice acts in each state, and as such, people should not expect infection control guidelines to

be followed. Also, HIPAA [Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act] requirements do not apply, so confidentiality is not ensured.

"The employees of the kiosks are not dental professionals. In effect, they are masquerading as health care professionals," continues Dr. Messina, indicating a cause for concern within the dental profession. "The public expects a high standard of care from the dental profession, and these kiosks are not in the business of living up to that standard because they are not part of the profession."

So how does one whiten his or her teeth safely? The Academy of General Dentistry says that the best whitening results depend on the use of a custom-made bleaching tray, which a dentist will be able to fit properly. At-home whitening strips may be another effective option. In any case, having a thorough exam performed by your dentist is critical to detect any issues, such as dental decay or gum recession, that need to be addressed prior to whitening. That is why it's extra important that those individuals who are considering whitening their teeth have had a dental exam within the last year. Additionally, some people may not be aware that these whitening methods will not work for crowns, bridges, or other prosthetic dental work and may result in tooth discoloration or even end up damaging existing dental work.

Tooth whitening is safe, but, ideally, it should be done under the watchful eye of a dentist to ensure proper results. Keep in mind that any damage to your teeth or tooth enamel caused by tooth whitening unsupervised by a dental professional is one purchase you can't return—even if you have a receipt.

For more information on tooth whitening and your oral health, contact the Massachusetts Dental Society at **(800) 342-8747** or visit www.massdental.org.

