

# Teeth Whitening at Home

## Sorting Through Teeth-Whitening Products

Here's an overview of teeth-whitening products currently on the market.

### Teeth-Whitening Strips

**How they work:** Teeth-whitening strips are thin, almost invisible pieces of plastic coated with a whitening solution (usually a low concentration of hydrogen peroxide). The strips are applied directly to your teeth for 5 to 30 minutes once or twice daily for 5 to 14 days (depending on the product). Generally, strips that are designed to be worn for shorter periods of time have higher concentrations of the whitening solution.

### Teeth-Whitening Gels

**How they work:** Designed to be painted directly on the teeth using a small brush or pen, teeth-whitening gels are typically peroxide-based. The gel is usually applied before you go to bed and left on overnight. The process is repeated for two weeks or longer.

### Teeth-Whitening Trays

**How they work:** Tray-based whitening systems involve filling a mouthpiece-like tray with a peroxide-based whitening gel. The tray is worn for a certain time period each day or night for one to four weeks or longer.

### Light-Based Kits

**How they work:** After using an acid rinse, you paint a whitening gel on your teeth with an applicator and hold a special light (included in the kit) up to your teeth to accelerate lightening. The process can be repeated multiple times.

### Teeth-Whitening Toothpastes

**How they work:** Toothpastes with whitening agents don't actually bleach or change the color of teeth. Instead, they help remove surface stains using polishing or chemical agents and mild abrasives. This may make the teeth look slightly whiter over

time.

## Do Teeth Whitening Products Work?

Most over-the-counter teeth whitening products will work to some degree if you use them long enough, says Kimberly Harms, DDS, a spokesperson and consumer advisor for the American Dental Association's (ADA). Over-the-counter teeth whitening products contain much lower concentrations of whitening agents than professional tooth whitening products used under the supervision of a dentist. "The biggest problem with these store-bought whiteners is that people give up too soon," says Dr. Harms. "In most cases, you need to use them for weeks and weeks and weeks before you'll see any change in the whiteness of your teeth." In a recent study published in the journal *General Dentistry*, people who used whitening strips for 30 minutes twice daily showed significant improvements in yellowness and lightness/brightness. But all the patients in the study used the strips for 44 consecutive days.

## Are Teeth-Whitening Products Safe?

Whitening your teeth using over-the-counter teeth whitening products is considered safe but some people may experience mild tooth sensitivity or gum irritation. If you experience these side effects, stop using the product for a few days, says Harms.

## Teeth-Whitening Tips

The following recommendations will help you get the most out of over-the-counter tooth-whitening products.

**Talk to your dentist before getting started.** The ADA recommends that you consult with your dentist before using a bleaching product, even an over-the-counter one. The reason: Whitening can be uncomfortable or ineffective for people with worn tooth enamel, gum disease, sensitive teeth, tooth-colored fillings, or crowns.

**Buy well-known brands.** Harms recommends choosing major brands that have been around for awhile when selecting an over-the-counter product.

**Look for the ADA seal.** Whitening toothpastes that display the ADA Seal of Acceptance have met the ADA's standards for safety and effectiveness. Harms says that no over-the-counter whitening strips, gels, trays, or light-based systems currently carry the ADA seal, although several bleaches dispensed by

dentists do.

**If you use the tray-based system, choose a tray with a flexible mouthpiece.** Some mouthpiece trays can be molded to your mouth to some degree. “It’s better than an inflexible mouthpiece that may not fit snugly around your teeth,” says Harms. If the mouthpiece doesn’t uniformly make contact with your teeth, whitening can be uneven. Plus, the solution may leak out, irritating your gums.

**Avoid staining beverages.** Your whitening will last longer if you avoid coffee, tea, and red wine. Also avoid smoking, which can stain the teeth.

**Wait to whiten if you’re pregnant or nursing.** It’s recommended that pregnant and nursing women avoid teeth whitening because the effects of whitening agents on fetuses and babies are unknown.

Though you shouldn't expect dramatic results from over-the-counter teeth-whitening products, over time, a store-bought teeth whitener can make your teeth several shades lighter. Slightly yellow teeth are the easiest to whiten, and new stains are easier to remove than old ones. Gray or black stains are more difficult, and may require professional whitening or another cosmetic dentistry procedure, such as veneers.