

# Professional Teeth Whitening Options

Want a brighter smile? Your dentist can help.

Of all the cosmetic treatments offered by dentists, teeth whitening is the most popular. That may be because teeth whitening is less expensive than most other cosmetic dental procedures, yet it can make a dramatic difference in a person's appearance and self confidence.

Teeth whitening products are available over the counter and at the dentist's office. "But seeing a dentist for teeth whitening is the fastest and most effective way to whiten your teeth because the bleaching materials are stronger than what's available in the stores," says Kimberly Harms, DDS, consumer advisor for the American Dental Association (ADA).

Professional teeth whitening can be performed in the office by your dentist or at home under your dentist's supervision. Here are the pros and cons of each method:

## Teeth Whitening Done by a Dentist

**How it works:** A whitening product is applied directly to the teeth. The product contains hydrogen peroxide (bleach) in concentrations of 15 to 35 percent. Light or heat may be used to accelerate the whitening.

**Pros.** Fast results. "One session lasting about 60 to 90 minutes can give excellent whitening," says Dr. Harms. Many people only need one visit but, some people may need two or three to achieve the color they want. Because the bleach is applied directly to the teeth, teeth whitening performed in a dentist's office gives the most uniform results.

**Cons.** Since the whitening solution is so concentrated, your gums must be protected with a gel or a rubber shield. Even so, some people experience temporary tooth sensitivity and gum irritation.

## Home Teeth Whitening Supervised by a Dentist

**How it works:** Your dentist takes impressions of your mouth and makes a customized mouthpiece for you to wear. You'll be given a tooth whitening gel containing a lower concentration of hydrogen peroxide than what's used for in-office whitening. At home, you'll fill the mouthpiece with the whitening gel and wear it for a few hours each day or night. The customized mouthpiece allows maximum contact between your teeth and the whitening gel.

**Pros:** Convenience and price. You can whiten your teeth on your own at home, while saving money over the more expensive in-office whitening. Your dentist will supervise the whitening with checkups to be sure the mouthpiece fits properly.

**Cons:** Slower results. The average patient must wear the mouthpiece for one to two weeks before whitening becomes visible. Some patients choose to wear the mouthpiece for several months, depending on the degree of staining on their teeth and the desired level of whitening. This form of professional whitening may require more visits to the dentist to check that the mouthpiece fits properly. Ill-fitting mouthpieces can allow the solution to leak out, causing irritation and uneven or unsatisfactory whitening.

## How White Can You Go With Teeth Whitening?

Professional teeth whitening (either performed or supervised by a dentist) can make your teeth up to seven shades lighter. Your dentist may show you cards with various shades of lightness to give you an idea of the amount of whiteness to expect.

However, the degree of whiteness achieved can vary considerably from person to person. "It's difficult for the dentist to predict exactly how white your teeth will get," says Harms. "The degree of whiteness can depend on the condition of your teeth, the nature of any stains, and genetics."

## Teeth Whitening Health Risks and Restrictions

Teeth whitening is safe and carries no serious oral health side effects but some people may experience mild tooth sensitivity or gum irritation after bleaching. "Your teeth may be a little more sensitive to cold, but this usually goes away," says Harms. A prescription gel can reduce the sensitivity, but most people don't need it.

It's recommended that pregnant and nursing women avoid teeth whitening because the effects of whitening agents on fetuses and babies are unknown. And people with gum disease or cavities shouldn't undergo teeth whitening until these conditions are treated because whitening solution can penetrate into tooth decay or diseased gums.

Keep in mind that teeth whitening isn't permanent. Maintaining your gleaming white smile means repeating the process regularly. But if you avoid smoking and other staining agents such as coffee, tea, and red wine, the effects of professional teeth whitening can last one to two years before a touchup is needed, and most people are happy with the results.