

Considering Veneers for a Hollywood Smile

If you're looking for a dazzling smile, veneers could be the answer. Veneers are tooth-colored shells made to cover your natural teeth and produce a bright, beautiful smile.

Veneers can correct a multitude of cosmetic defects, from discolored teeth to slightly crooked teeth to gaps in your smile. And advances in cosmetic dentistry have made veneers look even better today.

"The translucent quality of today's veneers gives a more natural look than what's been available in the past," says Kimberly Harms, DDS, a dentist in Farmington, Minn. and consumer advisor and spokesperson for the American Dental Association (ADA).

How Veneers Work

Dental veneers are very thin shells made from tooth-like material designed to cover the front surface of teeth. They can be made of porcelain or resin composite materials. Most veneers today are made of porcelain because this material resists stains better and has a light-reflecting quality similar to that of natural teeth. The veneers are placed on the front of the teeth, concealing imperfections and sometimes changing the size, shape, and length of teeth.

How Veneers Are Applied

Veneers usually require three dental visits. At the first visit, your dentist will discuss whether this cosmetic dentistry procedure will work for you. On the second visit, your dentist will remove a small amount of enamel (the outer coating of your teeth) to make room for the veneer. Usually only one-half millimeter is removed, but this may require local anesthesia.

"The enamel needs to be trimmed down so the tooth doesn't look too bulky," explains Dr. Harms.

An impression is then taken of your teeth and sent to a dental lab where the veneers are custom made. At the third visit, your dentist will attach the veneers to your teeth with special adhesive material.

Pros and Cons of Veneers

Veneers are among the most expensive cosmetic dentistry procedures, so it's important to weigh the pros and cons carefully when considering them.

Advantages of veneers:

Because veneers are made of material that mimics natural teeth and are individually shaped for each patient, it's nearly impossible to tell the difference between veneers and natural teeth.

Unlike other cosmetic options, porcelain veneers won't be stained by cigarette smoke, coffee, tea, and red wine.

The color of veneers can be selected from many whiteness shades. But you may want to resist the temptation to choose the lightest shade, cautions Harms. "Blinding-white veneers often don't look natural," she says.

For healthy teeth, veneers can be a good substitute for crowns (also called caps), which require removal of more of your natural tooth structure.

Disadvantages of veneers:

Depending on where you live, veneers can cost \$1,000 to \$2,500 per tooth, and they're rarely covered by insurance. To save money, you can opt to have veneers placed only on the teeth that show when you smile. Your dentist can then bleach the rest. "I just did six veneers for a patient yesterday," says Harms. "Many of my patients choose to get veneers only on the top 6 to 10 teeth."

After veneers are applied, your teeth may be more sensitive since some of the protective enamel is removed.

Also, keep in mind that once the teeth are prepared for veneers, the process cannot be reversed.

Are Veneers Right for You?

If you have gaps between your teeth, veneers can be a good alternative to braces. Veneers can also conceal chipping, cracks, or uneven teeth. In addition, veneers are perfect for teeth that don't respond to whitening.

"Some people have dark stains that don't bleach well, but a veneer will

cover the stain,” explains Harms.

Veneers are not appropriate for teeth that have been weakened by decay, fractures, or large fillings, however. You may need crowns instead if your teeth are significantly weakened, or if you have missing teeth.

People who clench their jaws and grind their teeth are also poor candidates for veneers since this can cause veneers to crack or chip.

Maintaining Your Veneers

With proper care, veneers can last 10 years or longer. But because veneers are so thin, they can break or even fall off if abused. To minimize the chance of this happening, avoid biting your nails and chewing on pencils, ice, and other hard objects. Brushing and flossing won't harm them, however.

In addition, it's important to practice good dental hygiene because teeth with veneers can still become decayed, possibly making it necessary to totally cover the tooth with a crown. Regular dental checkups will also help ensure that your veneers stay strong and flawless-looking.

With proper care of your veneers and good dental health habits, you can enjoy a superstar smile for years to come.