

Tooth Whitening *June/July 2004*

One of the most frequent questions we get in our office involves making teeth whiter. Whiter, brighter teeth can do wonders to a smile and give a person more self-confidence. This article will answer some frequently asked questions on tooth whitening and will briefly describe the safest methods involved.

The first thing we establish when a patient is interested in bleaching is the condition of the teeth to be whitened. If the teeth and gums are dirty then whitening will do no good. Also, cavities should be treated and filled before whitening. It does no good to have white teeth if they are rotting. Since tooth colored fillings and crowns (caps) do not whiten, the presence of these restorations in the front teeth may affect the desired results.

Once it has been established that the patient is a good candidate for tooth whitening, we come up with a method. The first method I will discuss is over the counter bleaching techniques. The most popular are Crest White Strips. The advantages are cost (\$25.00--\$30.00 per kit) and ease of use. You simply place the strips on your upper and lower front teeth for 1/2 hour twice a day. I often recommend this treatment if a patient is not sure if bleaching is right for them. If the strips work, then we may get better results with the more advanced bleaching systems. The disadvantage of this system is that it only bleaches the front teeth and sometimes it is difficult to keep the strips in place for the desired amount of time.

The next type of bleaching I will discuss is the take home treatment prescribed in my office. We make an upper and lower impression of your teeth and use these impressions to make a tray that custom fits your mouth. You then place the prescribed bleaching solution in the trays and wear them for the recommended length of time. If it is the nighttime solution, you wear them while you sleep. If it is the daytime solution, you wear them for 45 minutes. You can customize how this is done, but the most common method is once a day. You may also do 1/2 of the mouth at a time, e.g. the uppers only, to see how the procedure will work. This process takes 3-4 weeks, though results are often noticed after 1 week. After the initial program, you may wish to touch up the bleaching every 4-6 weeks, or as needed. The advantages of this system is that it does the whole arch (upper or lower) and the effects are typically more pronounced than with the over the counter methods. The disadvantage is cost, which can be up to \$400.00 for the whole mouth. Touch up kits, if desired, are available for \$30.00.

The final method for whitening that I would like to discuss in this article is the process of covering up the teeth. This method is the most predictable way to change the color of your teeth. It involves using tooth colored filling material or porcelain to actually bond to, and thus cover up, stained or yellow teeth. We can often do minor shape and position changes with these techniques as well. Covering up teeth involves the most time in the dental chair for diagnosis and treatment and this is one of the disadvantages. Cost can also be higher for this method, ranging from a couple of hundred dollars up into the thousands, depending on the case.

All of the people in our office are trained to answer your questions concerning whitening your teeth. This article is designed to raise your curiosity about the many different methods available and only scratches the surface. Chances are there is a technique available that is right for you. Please ask any one of us and we would be glad to help. Also, we would love your feedback on this article and our website in general. Please drop me or one of the girls an e-mail with comments and suggestions. Thanks for reading and keep brushing and flossing!!

Dr. Jeff