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Teeth Whitening: Do It Yourself or Visit the Dentist?

If your pearly whites have lost their luster, you may want to consider teeth whitening. But with choices ranging from laser treatments to less expensive solutions you can apply at home, how do you choose the best option for you?

Do you hesitate before flashing your big, bright smile — because it's not as bright as you'd like? You're not alone: According to the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry, 96 percent of respondents surveyed believe an attractive smile makes a person more appealing. But if your discolored teeth are keeping you tight-lipped, you may want to consider teeth-whitening treatments.

According to Elisa Mello, DDS, a cosmetic dentist at NYC Smile Design in New York City, there are various options, both professional teeth whitening and drugstore solutions, to consider. But is one option better than the other?

The teeth-whitening option you choose will depend on your budget, the severity of your teeth discoloration, and how dramatic you want your results to be. Keep in mind — teeth that are yellow will probably lighten more than teeth with a brownish or grayish tinge.

Here's how to choose the right tooth-whitening treatment for you.

Teeth-Whitening Option No. 1: Laser Bleaching at the Dentist's Office

"With laser bleaching, a barrier is put around the gum tissue and a strong bleach is put on your teeth," Dr. Mello says. "A laser light is used to activate the bleach and make it work."

Because your gums are protected and you are under the supervision of your dentist during this professional teeth-whitening treatment, the bleach is a stronger solution than one you'd use on your own at home.

Laser teeth whitening can be performed in one office visit, generally with three 20-minute bleaching treatments. Dr. Mello calls it instant gratification — "In an hour, you are going to walk out with your teeth a lot brighter." But this is the most expensive of the teeth-whitening options (see price estimates below).

Teeth-Whitening Option No. 2: Professional Bleaching Trays

Another professional teeth-whitening option your dentist may offer is bleaching trays. With this method, your dentist will use an impression of your teeth to design custom bleaching trays that perfectly fit your teeth. At home, you'll use a special bleaching solution in these trays daily for one to two weeks. According to Mello, bleaching trays can be used in addition to dentist office laser bleaching when stains are particularly bad or when you're looking for a dramatic result.

Teeth-Whitening Option No. 3: Over-The-Counter Teeth-Whitening Kits

Today, there are many types of over-the-counter teeth-whitening products available. "You can buy kits to make your own trays, gels, swabs, strips, paints — there are many different ways to actually get the bleach on your teeth," says Mello.

Of the various drugstore teeth-whitening choices, Mello recommends strips to her patients because you're less likely to swallow bleach or damage your gums with these products. While the bleaching solution used in over-the-counter products may be too mild to yield dramatic results or to whiten severely stained teeth, these products may help whiten mildly discolored teeth, especially in younger people since their enamel is stronger and less easily stained.

Making Your Decision

When weighing your options and deciding whether to undergo a teeth-whitening treatment, consider the following:

- **Cost.** Professional teeth-whitening treatments generally cost \$500 to \$1,200, depending on the option you choose. At-home teeth whitening kits cost anywhere from \$15 to \$50.

- **Maintenance.** Teeth-whitening treatments don't last forever, and most people need to get touch-ups. "In our office, we have that noticed results for in-office bleaching can last up to a year," says Mello. She says that you can expect the results of at-home professional whitening trays to last 6 to 12 months and over-the-counter whitening to last 3 to 6 months. She notes that people who smoke and regularly consume food and beverages that can discolor teeth, such as coffee, tea, and blueberries, can expect their results to fade more quickly. "If [patients] drink three espressos a day, in six months they will probably want to do a touch-up," says Mello. She says that some people can go one to two years between treatments if they limit their teeth-staining habits and regularly brush their teeth.

- **Risks to dental health.** "The biggest risk [of teeth whitening] is sensitivity to hot and cold afterwards," says Mello. "It's usually short-term; however, it can be quite uncomfortable." The bleaches used in teeth whitening can also damage the gums and other soft tissues inside your mouth, causing mouth sores and discomfort, so you must take care not to let the bleaching material come in contact with these tissues.

Talk with your dentist about your teeth-whitening options. He or she can assess the condition of your teeth and your overall dental health to help you determine the best option for you.

Last Updated: 07/22/2011