

Teeth Whitening

What is teeth whitening?

Teeth whitening is a common procedure in general dentistry and more specifically in cosmetic dentistry. It is the process of removing stains and discolouration from teeth through a bleaching process to make them look “whiter”.

Tooth whitening products contain either a chemical called hydrogen peroxide or carbamide peroxide. When these chemicals break down, oxygen gets into the hard outer surface (enamel) of the teeth, which whitens them. The whitening effects can last from a few months up to three years. This varies from person to person.

What are the most common procedures?

Laser whitening (otherwise known as in-chair bleaching) – Laser tooth whitening or in-surgery whitening is a procedure that takes place at the dental practice and uses a light-activated bleaching gel to whiten your teeth. The procedure usually takes approximately one to two hours and produces instant whitening results. Many dentists recommend that laser whitening should be followed up by professional home whitening.

Professional bleaching - This is carried out by your dentist. It can be external or internal. If you have external bleaching, the gel is placed on the outer surfaces of your teeth. Internal bleaching involves the bleaching product being put inside your tooth. External bleaching is more common, as internal bleaching can only be used if you have had root canal treatment, making access to the inside of your tooth easier.

External bleaching – This is similar to over-the-counter tooth whitening kits. Your dentist will make rubber mouth trays that fit your teeth exactly, and the gel will be stronger and therefore more effective. They will give you tubes of bleaching gel and instructions on how to put the gel in the mouth trays. You will need to regularly wear the mouth trays for 30 minutes to one hour, over a period of two to four weeks.

Power or laser bleaching can also be done by your dentist. He or she will place a rubber seal around your teeth to protect your gums. Then the bleaching gel is put onto your teeth and a special, bright light is used to speed up the whitening process. This treatment usually takes about one hour.

Internal bleaching - This can only be done if you’ve had root canal treatment. This means that the blood vessels and nerves inside your tooth have been replaced with a rubber filling. If you have internal bleaching, your dentist will drill a hole in your tooth and put the bleaching product into the hole. He or she will then use the hole that was previously made for your root treatment, although it

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may need to be made slightly larger. Your dentist will seal the hole with a temporary filling, leaving the bleach inside your tooth. You will need to go back to your dentist about a week later to have the temporary filling and bleach taken out. He or she will fill the hole with a tooth-coloured filling.

Professional home whitening kits - To make a professional home whitening kit, your dentist will take an impression (mould) of your teeth using special dental putty. Your dentist's technician will then use this to cast a model of your teeth from plaster and make your custom teeth whitening trays from this. Once these trays have been made (usually takes 5-10 days) you use them in combination with professional whitening gel (provided by your dentist). Professional home whitening kits provide more permanent results over a longer timescale, whereas laser tooth whitening offers immediate results.

Over-the-counter tooth whitening kits - These are sold in most major pharmacies throughout the UK. They usually contain rubber mouth trays (moulds that are approximately the same shape as your teeth) and tubes of bleaching gel. After squeezing some of the gel into the mouth trays, you place them over your teeth, usually for about 30 minutes at a time. The bleaching ingredient in the gel is usually hydrogen peroxide. The kits will only contain weak hydrogen peroxide, so may not be as effective as the stronger products used by your dentist. Some products that you can buy over the counter are more effective than others. This depends on how much bleaching ingredient they contain.

Over the counter kits have a standard size mouth piece and are not customised to fit the individual. This means that if an effective strength of whitening gel is used there is a very real risk that the gums will get damaged because it is impossible to stop the gel coming into contact with the soft tissue without a customised tray made from impressions of the teeth. Many over the counter kits contain gel that is very weak and so whilst they won't do any harm they also won't work effectively.

How long will the effects of tooth whitening last?

The whitening effects can last from a few months up to three years, but this varies from person to person. It also depends on the type of treatment you receive and the individual's eating, drinking, smoking and brushing habits.

What are the side-effects?

Side-effects of tooth whitening include temporary sensitivity of your teeth to hot and cold, a sore throat, tender gums and white patches on your gums. These should disappear after a few days.

What are the UK regulations for teeth whitening?

The General Dental Council (GDC) claim that only registered dentists and dental hygienists can perform teeth whitening procedures. They maintain that it is illegal for a non-dental professional to carry out teeth whitening. According to the

Dentists Act of 1984, it is illegal for non-registered individuals to practice dentistry by providing *teeth whitening*.

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The GDC has clearly signalled that it will seek to prosecute those who are not registered and who provide teeth whitening services. To date there have already been a number of prosecutions; the GDC recently won a case against the director of a clinic for illegal performing tooth whitening.

However, this continues to be a grey area. In 2001 teeth whitening products were confirmed as being 'cosmetics' by the House of Lords, ruling in the case of Optident Limited and another vs. The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. This means that non-dentists can perform teeth whitening treatments provided that the treatments are correctly certified, the products are legally accredited and the treatments are performed within specific guidelines that do not constitute the practice of dentistry. Technicians would have to be highly trained and follow a strict protocol.

There are certain practices that could occur during the performance of a treatment which may constitute the practice of dentistry. For example, the diagnosis of any abnormality present or the suggestion of the use of a certain drug, even over-the-counter-drugs. Technicians must be trained and know exactly what they can and cannot do during a treatment so as to remain within the law.

The legality of teeth whitening and bleaching also depends upon the nature and concentration of the products being used. Many teeth whitening products have no bleaching component. As the law presently stands, the main complications arise when supplying products which contain (or release) more than 0.1% hydrogen peroxide. This remains illegal even when carried out by a dentist, hygienist or therapist.

What does this mean for health clubs offering teeth whitening services?

- Tooth whitening is a controversial issue which the GDC has fought hard to clamp down on. Salons, spas and health clubs can provide teeth whitening as a cosmetic treatment but a number of technicalities and legal considerations have to be taken into account. Treatment must be performed by highly trained cosmetic teeth whitening technicians, who are both fully certified and insured.
- As of 2011, all clinics and healthcare professionals must be registered with the Care Quality Commission (CQC). If they are not registered with the CQC, they are not allowed to practice and can be criminally prosecuted by the Care Quality Commission.
- Whitening gel products must have been tested by a UK government body and deemed safe, patient health conditions must have been checked and patients must read and complete a consent form in every case.

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