

Secrets to a Whiter, Brighter Smile

The key to a star-worthy smile is a set of teeth that are shiny and porcelain-like, à la Anne Hathaway and Halle Berry. Since time, age, food, and drinks can prevent your chompers from being their whitest, read on for how to get a brighter smile and a healthier mouth while you're at it.



How your diet can lead to tooth discoloration.

When dark foods and drinks sit on the teeth long enough, they can seep through the enamel and into the next layer called the dentin," says Dr. Gregg Lituchy, cosmetic dentist and partner at Lowenberg & Lituchy in NYC. The top teeth-staining culprits are coffee, tea, red wine, and tobacco, since these tend to be held in your mouth the longest. "If you absolutely need your cup of joe in the morning, brush your teeth immediately afterward to prevent it from soaking through your teeth."

Find the treatment that's best for you.

Today, the terms "whitening" and "bleaching" seem to be used interchangeably, but there are major differences. "Bleaching refers to products that contain hydrogen peroxide or carbamide peroxide to whiten the teeth further than their natural color," says Dr. Ramin Tabib, a cosmetic dentist from NYC Smile Design. "Whitening, on the other hand, restores the tooth's surface color by removing debris in the form of mouthwash or toothpaste."

"In order for the inner layer of dark stains to be removed, the bleaching solution needs to stay on teeth long enough for it to penetrate deeper into the teeth to break apart the molecules of the stain," says Dr. Lituchy. "Therefore, bleaching has longer-lasting effects than simple whitening systems and tends to be more expensive."

Know the risks of bleaching.

To see how your teeth react to the service, try a less expensive, at-home kit to before you drop a ton of money at the dentist office. (We recommend Crest Advanced Seal 3-D White, \$42.99; drugstore.com.) Unfortunately you can't lighten artificial dental work, so don't waste your time if you have tooth-colored veneers, fillings, caps, or crowns. You may experience sensitivity post-treatment, but the plus side is that it's gone within a few weeks. (Pop an Advil if it gets unbearable.) "For in-office services, anesthesia is an option for patients who have really sensitive teeth," says Dr. Tabib. "I also recommend

avoiding abrasive toothpastes, carbonated drinks, and fruit juices with high acidity two weeks prior to your treatment. If you bought an at-home kit, try using the strips or trays every other day instead of the recommended consecutive days." Those who have receding gums might want to avoid the process as well, since tooth sensitivity is already high in these cases and will only be enhanced during the treatment. Also, if you have calcium spots (little white areas on the surface of your teeth), there's a chance that they can become more prominent. Lastly, women who are pregnant should steer clear, since some dentists worry that bleach could potentially be harmful to a fetus.

Beware of over-bleaching.

Remember the episode of Friends where Ross gets his teeth bleached, and the effects are so over-the-top that the black light in his date's apartment exposes his insanely white smile? Besides looking like a Cheshire Cat or like you have a box of Chiclets as teeth, over-bleaching can also be damaging to the enamel. "Don't bleach more than once a year, and always do it under a dentist's supervision," says Dr. Eda Ellis, owner of Central Park Dental Spa in NYC. "Bleaching makes teeth more porous, which causes them to be more fragile and increases sensitivity."

How to maintain your newly-whitened smile.

"Avoid any teeth-staining foods and drinks, along with tobacco, for as long as possible," says Dr. Tabib. "At NYC Smile Design, we offer an at-home kit after your in-office Zoom! teeth whitening to keep your results bright."

"Snack on apples, pears, strawberries, celery, carrots, and any kind of raw veggie or fruit," says Dr. Elisa Mello, also a cosmetic dentist at NYC Smile Design. "These foods produce saliva that will help remove bacteria and clean your teeth. Chewing gum that contains Calprox can act as a detergent, stimulating saliva flow and fresh breath. (Try Supersmile Professional Whitening Gum), although any sugar-free gum will work too. After each meal, swish with water for 30 seconds to wash away stains and debris left behind from the food that you ate."