

THE BRIGHT STUFF

What's the best way to whiten your teeth? That depends on what condition they're in and how much time and money you're willing to spend. All procedures involve bleaching with peroxide, which, "when used correctly, is safe and effective," says New York City dentist Jennifer Jablow. "But if you're using whitening toothpastes, rinses and gels regularly and getting professional bleaching treatments more than once a year, you run the risk of developing brittleness in the teeth, gum recession and irreversible sensitivity." Overbleaching can also make teeth porous and susceptible to staining. So don't overdo it.

It's crucial to get your dentist's okay, even for over-the-counter methods. Caps, bonds and fillings cannot be bleached; your dentist can evaluate your teeth and advise you. More important, "if you have cavities or loose fillings, hydrogen peroxide can damage nerves," says Gerald Curatola, a dentist with offices in New York City; East Hampton, New York; Palm Beach; and abroad. You may also need a polishing treatment to remove plaque, which prevents bleach from reaching the teeth. Below, the best of the brighteners.

At Your Dentist's Office

The Routine: The dentist uses a bleaching solution activated by a handheld ultraviolet light.

Time Commitment: Forty-five minutes.

Pro: A dentist can use the highest concentration of hydrogen peroxide recommended by the American Dental Association, so you get whiter teeth in one session.

Con: Sensitivity or discomfort can occur during the procedure and last a few days.

Cost: \$500–\$1,000.

With Custom-Fit Trays

The Routine: The dentist designs custom-fit plastic molds for you to wear at

home, using a milder bleaching solution than the one used in his or her office.

Time Commitment: Two hours a day for ten days. To touch up in-office results: one to two hours a day for two to three days.

Pro: "This method gets your teeth the whitest, since they're in the bleaching solution the longest," says New York City dentist Russ B. Mandor.

Cons: The trays can be cumbersome, and it takes discipline to stick to a ten-day regimen. Because of prolonged exposure to bleach, this procedure is not recommended for people with sensitive teeth.

Cost: \$400–\$800; free with some in-office whitening treatments.

Storefront Whitening Spas (BriteSmile)

The Routine: A technician coats your teeth with a bleaching solution that's milder than the medical concentration and then exposes them to a blue light.

Time Commitment: Roughly one hour.

Pros: You can walk in on the spur of the moment. The lower concentration of peroxide may minimize sensitivity.

Cons: This method may not whiten to the degree a dentist can. And although a dentist is on-site, such an establishment does not treat cavities or other problems.

Cost: \$399 if booked ahead; \$600 for a walk-in appointment.

Whitening Strips (Crest, Rembrandt)

The Routine: You apply clear plastic strips coated with a bleaching agent.

Time Commitment: Thirty minutes a day, once or twice a day, for one week.

Pros: Inexpensive. "When used correctly, they give terrific results," Mandor says.

Cons: The hands-on method requires persistence and a little deftness. The strips don't reach between your teeth, and because they are one size fits all, they may not cover all the teeth evenly. If not properly applied, the strips may irritate gums.

Cost: \$25 and up.

CARA KAGAN