

## Great White

"Alright, everyone turn this way and smile", says our photographer.

*\*\*Flash\*\**

"AAHHHH!!", says the photographer, temporarily blinded by the light reflected off the teeth of the wedding party.

Well, not really, but if it was up to my wife, this is exactly what would have happened during our wedding pictures. She is like millions of other Americans who equate a dazzling white smile with health and beauty. (I do too, but as a dentist, I'm biased.) Having white teeth gives you a glowing appearance, makes your smile appear straighter, and helps to hide minor irregularities. In other words, "if you can't make them fine, make them shine."

There are several ways to achieve a bright, white smile. Many of my patients have tried whitening toothpastes or gums with mild success. These methods can help to remove external staining on the teeth, but don't really lighten the color of the teeth themselves. I have found the paste and gum to be a great addition to other procedures, however. The over the counter whitening strips work a little better, but the bleaching agents they contain are weak and do not whiten as quickly or as thoroughly as professional whitening. In addition, the strips do not conform to the areas between the teeth, which often need it the most, and the paint on product washes off pretty quickly.

The most popular professional whitening method available is making a set of custom trays and using a special bleaching gel at home once or twice a day. Your dentist takes impressions of your teeth and makes soft plastic mouthpieces that fit your teeth and your teeth only. This allows the bleaching gel, when placed properly in the trays, to be held closely against the tooth enamel. This bleach gradually whitens stains and the enamel itself, leading to a brighter smile. The trays are comfortable and transparent, meaning others usually cannot tell when you have them in. The trays can be worn in the morning while you shower and get ready, in the car driving to and from work, or any other time you have thirty minutes where you don't mind your speech being impaired. (The trays are comfy, but they can make you sound like Elmer Fudd). The drawback to this procedure is that you don't get overnight results. It takes an average of two to three weeks to get to the shade you desire; more in certain cases.

For those of you with less patience or self discipline, laser bleaching or power bleaching may be the answer. This is an in-office procedure that takes about an hour or an hour and a half, but you walk out with significantly whiter teeth. In this treatment, the dentist uses a powerful laser light to activate a special, extra strong bleaching gel. Custom home trays are usually provided as well for touch up or more extensive bleaching. This method also lightens teeth more than the trays alone, along with making the process much quicker. What laser bleaching does in an hour takes tray bleaching several weeks to accomplish. For those of you with deep, internal stain, this is the way to go as long as you like the shape and size of your teeth. The only drawback here is expense. It runs about twice what the trays alone cost.

The final and most dramatic treatment for changing the color of your teeth doesn't require bleaching solutions at all. This is what's called "veneering". Using white filling material or thin, custom crafted pieces of porcelain, a new outer layer is created on your teeth. This allows many other aspects of your smile to be changed as well. Your teeth can be straightened without braces and gaps can be closed; they can be made larger, smaller, whiter, darker, or pink with purple polka dots if you so desired. Veneering covers up imperfections that other treatments cannot touch. These "custom smiles" are done routinely on models and movie stars to give them their amazing on camera look. This is the ultimate treatment available in cosmetic dentistry, and a mouth make over like this can seriously improve your looks and boost your confidence. I have seen many people who never really smiled not be able to stop grinning. It is a wonderful feeling to be able to do that for someone. Be *very* careful about what dentist you select to perform this procedure. Ask about training and experience. A good cosmetic dentist will have an extensive before and after photo gallery, may have former patients you could speak to about the procedure, and will have trained at a reputable teaching facility, such as the Las Vegas Institute for Advanced Dental Studies. Not all "veneers" are created equal.

With all bleaching cases, there are factors that may affect the outcome. No bleach can change the color of a crown or filling material in the front of the mouth, although these can certainly be replaced once your new shade is reached. Certain colors of teeth also lend themselves to bleaching more readily. People with certain problems in the makeup of their teeth may have different results. Only your dentist can advise you of the probable outcomes of your particular situation. So think about those those pictures and ask yourself what you look like when you "say cheese". And if you don't think you can stun the photographer with your blazing white teeth, ask your friendly dentist to help you out.

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