



# **Teeth Whitening 101:**

## **Everything You Need to Know About Teeth Whitening**

By Penn Dental Family Practice



# What is Teeth Whitening?

Teeth whitening is a cosmetic dental treatment aimed at making your teeth look whiter and brighter. By removing stains and unattractive discolorations, whitening greatly improves the appearance of your teeth.

The tooth's hard, white outer layer is called enamel. The color of natural teeth comes from the reflection of light off the enamel combined with the yellow color of the dentin lying underneath the enamel. Genetics play a big role in the thickness of your enamel and thus the color of your teeth. Having smoother or rougher enamel can also affect the appearance of how light reflects off your teeth. Enamel has pores which hold onto stains. Stains can be contributed to a number of factors, including:

- Tobacco use.
- Drinking dark-colored liquids like coffee, tea, red wine, or dark sodas.
- Cavities.
- Not taking proper care of your teeth.

People opt for teeth whitening because it's a relatively easy "makeover" that can subtly improve their professional appearance. Whitening is a great way to look **younger and healthier** without having to make large commitments or significant lifestyle changes. Whitening will make your teeth five to **eight shades lighter** on a scale of 16.



## Options for Teeth Whitening

Generally speaking, there are two types of teeth whitening both of which are offered at our Penn Dental Family Practice offices. There is **in-office whitening**, also known as laser or power whitening, and **at-home whitening**, or tray whitening.

While in the end they can both produce the same result, they are different in terms of their approach. In-office whitening applies a **high concentration whitener** for a **short period of time** (usually about an hour and a half in the dentist's chair). **At-home whitening applies a low concentration whitener** for an **extended time frame** (7-14 days at home).



According to the American Dental Association, the bleaching substance used is a hydrogen peroxide gel with a 25% - 40% concentration. When high concentrations are applied (as in the case of in-office whitening), special precautions are taken to protect the lips, gums, and oral tissues, including:

- Cheek retractors.
- Soft or rubber dams to cover gums.
- Desensitizing pastes to strengthen and harden enamel.
- Application of fluoride.



## At-Home vs. In-Office: Pros and Cons

When you're deciding whether to try the at-home method or the in-office one, you'll want to discuss the options with your dentist based on your particular situation. **In-office whitening** tends to produce **faster, safer results**, and **some types of stains are better removed by a professional**. By the same token, there are disadvantages to in-office whitening, and **some types of stains are better treated over an extended period of time**, which you can do at home.

The pros of in-office whitening include **safety and controllability**. By whitening in-office, you can enjoy the assurance of a controlled procedure administered by experts. Because of the precautions taken in-office, you avoid the risks of tooth sensitivity and root damage that can occur with at-home treatment.

One drawback of in-office whitening is the cost, which is generally higher than that associated with at-home treatment. For some people, the in-office treatment may not have as predictable an outcome due to age, heredity, and the types of stains involved. Stains best treated by a professional include those caused by:

- Consumption of dark foods/drinks.
- Tobacco use.
- Yellowing due to aging.

A benefit of in-office whitening is that you can rest assured that the responsibility doesn't fall on you. While take-home trays require daily use and application, an in-office whitening places the responsibility on your specially trained doctor.

On the other hand, **you should opt for the extended treatment** if you have stains due to these causes:

- Trauma to the teeth.
- Taking tetracycline antibiotics when your teeth were still developing.
- Overexposure to fluoride.
- Deep staining, which may be resistant to in-office bleaches.
- Transparency from aging, which indicates a thinning of the enamel that may be sensitive to the intense bleaching of a single office visit.





You may also be **recommended to use take-home trays if you have highly sensitive gums** because a lower concentration of the whitening agent over time will help guard against a hypersensitive reaction.

Some of our patients ask **if the whitening systems sold over-the-counter are comparable to the take-home trays we offer at Penn Dental Family Practice.** The truth is that they are not. Store-bought whitening products do not give the same result as professional systems, which is why we recommend coming in for an evaluation to consult with a dentist before making a decision.

## What's the In-Office Procedure Like?

When you come to Penn Dental Family Practice, you will meet with a whitening specialist to discuss your best options, like those explained above in the Pros vs. Cons section. You will also learn more about each procedure and the solutions they offer.



Here's a breakdown of what you can expect when you elect to do the procedure in-office:

### 1. Preparation

- First, your teeth will receive a prophylactic cleaning to clear away any debris or plaque that has accumulated on and between the teeth. Prophylactic cleaning is the method used by dentists to halt the spread of gum disease and tooth decay.



- A dental exam will be conducted to check for problems such as tooth decay or gum disease, as these can become severely irritated if they aren't addressed prior to the whitening procedure.
- Photos may be taken of your teeth so that you can have a benchmark for comparison after the treatment.

## 2. Application

Typically, the steps described below aren't uncomfortable or painful. Most patients are able to relax, and hardly realize the procedure is occurring.

- First, a cheek retractor will be inserted into the mouth to expose the teeth for whitening. Then, a liquid rubber dam or hardening resin is applied to the gum tissue as protection against irritation by the bleaching gel.
- A bleaching gel will be applied to the teeth and left there for 15-30 minutes. This first round of whitening is removed and then fresh gel is applied one or more times for 15-30 minute sessions.
- Some treatments involve shining an intense light on the teeth to enhance the bleaching process.
- The teeth are assessed between applications to see how well they are whitening and whether more bleach should be applied.
- After the final application, the cheek retractors are removed and the patient rinses.

## 3. Evaluation/Post-procedural Activities

- At this point, the immediate post-treatment shade is measured. Your teeth will likely be slightly more white at this time than they will be in a few days due to the dehydrating effect of the bleaching.
- You'll be given a take-home tray to continue to "touch up" after your in-office visit. A potential disadvantage of a one-time, in-office treatment is





that the teeth can be vulnerable to staining afterwards. **Penn Dental Family Practice provides trays in addition to your in-office treatment as a way to counter this potential problem, ensuring that your teeth will continue to look perfect!**

## Why Whiten at Penn Dental Family Practice?

Penn Dental Family Practice is a leading provider of dentistry in the Philadelphia area. As a family-oriented office, we address a wide variety of dental needs for people of all ages. When you choose us for your whitening procedure, you get the benefit of the Penn dedication to quality. Our staff is comprised of doctors who are also professors from the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine.

We're at the forefront of research and use the latest and best dental technologies available. Our dentists are highly knowledgeable, caring professionals who want you to enjoy optimal results. The professional whitening systems utilized in our office were chosen because of the high degree of effectiveness they offer.

We hope you'll consider us as your whitening provider because we're excited to help you take your teeth's appearance to the next level. Penn Dental Family Practice ensures attractive, healthy outcomes!







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