

An inside look at pricier treatments that might actually be worth the investment

SALON *Secrets*

Looking for a brighter, whiter smile? With so many options to choose from these days, we discover what's really going to get your gnashers gleaming and what's just a gimmick.

A quick search online for whitening products will bring up an array of choices, all claiming to be the quick, easy solution to turn stained, yellowing teeth into perfect pearly whites. The health and beauty industry has become swamped with toothpastes, strips, at-home kits and gadgets, but the simple truth is that many of them either won't make any difference at all, or even worse, may seriously harm your health. There are plenty of horror stories documented by dentists, of long-lasting tooth sensitivity or blistered, burnt gums.

Even some toothpastes branded as 'whitening' should be avoided. 'They contain no active ingredients at all,' says award-winning dental hygienist Anna Middleton. 'Or they may be missing key ingredients required to maintain healthy teeth, such as fluoride. Some whitening toothpastes may help to remove surface stains but can be abrasive and damage enamel, making your teeth more prone to staining in the long run. And while charcoal toothpaste is generally not as abrasive as whitening toothpaste, there is no evidence to prove its effectiveness on stain removal, and it may even contribute to negative aesthetic effects. Charcoal

particles can become embedded in cracks or around crowns, veneers and fillings, which can attract further yellowing and staining over time.'

Whitening strips have become very popular recently but these need to be treated with caution, too. 'These will be ineffective and a complete waste of your money,' says Anna. 'Others may contain chemicals that actually destroy your enamel, irritate your gums and increase the chances of tooth decay.'

So what's the safe way to whiten your smile without doing damage? There are really only three options – and they all involve heading straight to your dentist or hygienist. Don't be tempted to do otherwise.

Firstly, it's important to identify what might have caused any discolouration – whether it's simply genetics, the wear and tear that comes with ageing, or lifestyle factors such as smoking, coffee drinking or ineffective brushing. Teeth also naturally vary in shade due to the thickness of enamel – the thinner the enamel is, the more semi-transparent it becomes, allowing the inner dentin layer (with a yellower colour) to show through. While yellowing teeth tend to be good candidates for whitening, greying teeth, particularly those caused by certain medicines, such as by the

antibiotic tetracycline, can be much more difficult, with little to no results available.

Your dentist or hygienist will be able to help manage your expectations and advise you on which treatment will suit you best. We will all get different results and should understand this before embarking on whitening.

Clean up

First up, a deep clean of your teeth can work wonders, has instant results, and may in fact be all you need. In any case, before embarking on any whitening, it's important that your teeth are completely free of surface stains and deposits. Having quite sensitive teeth, I've never been a fan of sessions in the hygienist's chair, so I was delighted to try out a new treatment called Guided Biofilm Therapy, which uses Airflow technology – a powerful combination of water, air and fine powder sprayed on and around your teeth to remove biofilm, tartar and surface stains.

Compared to previous hygienist sessions, this was positively pleasant. For starters, it's quick, taking just over five minutes from start to finish. Furthermore, it was practically painless, even with my sensitivity. It's gentle yet super-effective, and less abrasive than traditional scale-and-polish cleans. There are also fewer pokey-scratchy implements involved. My teeth looked and felt ultra smooth and much brighter already. Expect to pay anything between £50 to £120 for an Airflow clean, depending on location and the length of appointment.

Lighten up

With squeaky clean teeth, I could now progress to whitening. 'There are only two chemicals that can actually change the colour of teeth,' Anna explains. 'Hydrogen peroxide or carbamide peroxide, and they work by causing a chemical reaction that breaks apart carbon bonds that create yellow stains on our teeth. Once broken, they no longer reflect a yellow shade.'

Up until 2012, teeth whitening was unregulated, but the European Union passed legislation that means only dental professionals are allowed to perform teeth-whitening procedures. To be absolutely clear, 'dental professional' means a trained dentist, a dental hygienist or therapist working to the prescriptions of a dentist. Just be cautious of local beauty salons offering whitening treatments – it is illegal for them to do so unless they have a trained dentist to check the patient is receiving appropriate advice and prescribing the correct treatment. I had an initial check up with dentist Dr Rhona Eskander at the Chelsea Dental Clinic, to ensure I was dentally fit before whitening.

The EU also capped the levels of active ingredients in whitening treatments – six per cent for hydrogen peroxide and 10 per cent for carbamide peroxide. Previously, some products were using percentages as high as 38 per cent, with dire consequences. These are sadly still floating around online. At the other end of the potency scale, you can find whitening products that claim to meet the European legislation by containing 0.1% hydrogen peroxide. 'You'll be wasting your time and money,' advises Anna. 'They will possibly, at best, remove a few stains, but are unlikely to have any real whitening effect at all.'

There are two routes to choose; either in-chair whitening at your dentist or at-home whitening, using trays that have been moulded to the shape of your teeth. The moulded trays are crucial here – a badly fitting tray from an off-the-shelf kit could lead to either the whitening gel leaking out on to your gums or an uneven result.

In-chair whitening requires you to sit still for an hour-long appointment while your dentist paints a whitening agent on to your teeth. A light is then shone into your mouth to accelerate the bleaching process. It gives an immediate result, and you can follow this up with some at-home whitening to improve the result. It costs more than at-home whitening due to the surgery time and materials – expect to pay in the region of £500 to £600.

At-home whitening is just as effective but without such a hefty price tag – around £200 to £300. Having had my moulded trays made, Anna showed me how to fill them with the correct amount of gel. I used Philips Zoom DayWhite treatment, which involves wearing the gel-filled trays for approximately an hour every day. The trays are uber comfortable – I hardly noticed I had them in. Every day, I watched my teeth slowly but steadily go up the colour-matching chart (I like the control this gives you, as you can stop whenever you feel in danger of going too white) and experienced no painful sensitivity at all. A glass of cold water felt a tiny bit colder than normal perhaps... but nothing of any concern.

In just ten days, my results were seriously impressive – everyone kept asking if I'd been away as I looked so well. The result should last a while, and now I have my trays, it couldn't be easier to top up if I need. Without doubt, this is a treatment I would recommend – a real confidence-booster – and the younger we do it, the more assured the results, so don't wait too long. I'm positively beaming! 🌟

Anna Middleton practices at the Chelsea Dental Clinic and White & Co in Battersea, londonhygienist.com
Find more safety information at safetoothwhitening.org