



News Release

For Immediate Release

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Tooth Whitening: Know the Risks

With the increasing value many people place on sparkling white teeth as part of an attractive smile, more and more consumers are requesting teeth whitening, also known as bleaching, when they visit their dentists.

Oral health experts caution however, that bleaching carries with it some risks that consumers should discuss with their dentists – especially if they are going to bleach their teeth using at-home bleaching systems. Discussing these risks as part of a regular examination can help head off undesirable consequences.

“Dentists cannot predict if a patient will have problems or sensitivities to the procedure, but discussing bleaching with your dentist ensures they can more readily help you head off potential problems,” said Dr. Max Anderson, DDS, a national oral health advisor for Delta Dental Plans Association.

A child's baby teeth are generally whiter than the adult teeth that follow. Over time, adult teeth normally darken due to natural changes in the color of the tooth's dentin. These color changes are “internal” to the tooth.

Personal habits can also play a role. Tobacco use or drinking coffee, tea and other beverages can cause “external” staining. Certain medications can discolor teeth.

Bleaching is used to alter the “internal” color of the tooth. Tooth cleaning by your dental office can often remove the “external” stains.

The risks oral health experts associate with bleaching include tooth sensitivity and damage to the roots of teeth. Dentists may be able to help patients alleviate sensitivity and recommend toothpastes designed to treat sensitive teeth. Dentists can also monitor patients for signs of root damage and treat the condition if detected in time.

Patients also must weigh many factors. First, as noted above, not all stains can be lightened by over-the-counter or professional bleaching, so consulting your dentist is a good idea. Additionally, other factors such as cost and convenience should be considered. Most dental benefit plans do not cover bleaching and they may not reimburse enrollees for bleaching costs. This lack of coverage arises from the federal tax code. Under the tax code, many services considered "cosmetic" can't be purchased with pre-tax contributions to an employee's income, or reimbursed through flexible spending accounts.

“The best course of action if you bleach your teeth is to continue a program of preventive dental examinations,” said Dr. Anderson. “Maintaining a relationship with your dentist is an important part of maintaining good oral health.”

Delta Dental Plans Association, based in Oak Brook, IL, is a national network of independent not-for-profit dental service corporations specializing in providing dental benefits programs to 47 million Americans in more than 81,000 employee groups throughout the country.

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