



Tooth Talk

“Hey Doc, my teeth are getting yellow. I want white teeth!! What are my options?” (Part 1)

Today whiter, brighter, lighter teeth are desired by the general public. A white smile is associated with radiant health, happiness, warmth, youth and is perceived as a winner. Discoloured teeth lead to social embarrassment, psychological trauma, and aesthetic impairment. Due to the increasing demand for white teeth, many products (either over-the-counter or professionally applied) have surfaced onto the market, promising consumers a bright smile as the end result. Before we discuss the different options of whitening teeth, let us first explore why teeth discolor or darken.

Tooth discoloration may be categorized as “intrinsic”, “extrinsic”, or a combination of both. Intrinsic tooth discoloration is caused by changes in the structure of enamel (a tooth’s outer layer) or dentin (a tooth’s inner layer) or by incorporation of chromogenic (color generating) material into tooth tissue, either during tooth formation or after eruption. Wear of teeth, thickening of dentin due to aging or as a consequence of nerve inflammation affect the light-transmitting properties of enamel and dentin, resulting in a gradual discoloration.

Aging results in changes in the mineral structure of the tooth; enamel loses its youthful translucency, becoming more porous; and the underlying dentin thickens and becomes more yellow. Intrinsic discoloration is also caused by exposure to high level of fluoride or tetracycline antibiotics use during childhood, inherited developmental disorders and jaundice in childhood.

After eruption, tooth decay, metallic fillings, tooth nerve death (root canal problems) and trauma to developing teeth, are the main causes of intrinsic discoloration.

Extrinsic staining mainly results from dietary factors and smoking. Foods containing tannins such as red wine, coffee, and tea can give rise to extrinsic stain. Carotenes, pigments in oranges and carrots, and tobacco use, whether it is smoking or chewing, also lead to extrinsic stain.

In the upcoming articles, we’ll discuss the different options of whitening teeth.



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