

# Whitening: 4 Things to Know About Getting a Brighter Smile

[Brushing](#) and [flossing](#) are everyday ways to keep your teeth bright, white and healthy. Still, if you might feel like your smile is lacking some sparkle or is more yellow than it used to be, you're not alone. When the [American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry](#) asked people what they'd most like to improve about their smile, the most common response was whiter teeth. The [American Association of Orthodontists](#) also found that nearly 90% of patients requested tooth whitening.

Thinking about teeth whitening? Get the facts first. Here are five of the most commonly asked questions about the process.

## Why Did My Teeth Change Color?

Over time, your teeth can go from white to not-so-bright for a number of reasons:

### Food and Drink

Coffee, tea and red wine are some major staining culprits. What do they have in common? Intense color pigments called chromogens that attach to the white, outer part of your tooth ([enamel](#)).

### Tobacco Use

Two chemicals found in [tobacco](#) create stubborn stains: Tar and nicotine. Tar is naturally dark. Nicotine is colorless until it's mixed with oxygen. Then, it turns into a yellowish, surface-staining substance.

### Age

Below the hard, white outer shell of your teeth (enamel) is a softer area called [dentin](#). Over time, the outer enamel layer gets thinner with brushing and more of the yellowish dentin shows through.

### Trauma

If you've been hit in the mouth, your tooth may change color because it reacts to an injury by laying down more dentin, which is a darker layer under the enamel.

### Medications

Tooth darkening can be a side effect of certain antihistamines, antipsychotics and high blood pressure medications. Young children who are exposed to antibiotics like tetracycline and doxycycline when their teeth are forming (either in the womb or as a baby) may have discoloration of their adult teeth later in life. [Chemotherapy](#) and head and neck radiation can also darken teeth.

## How Does Teeth Whitening Work?

Teeth whitening is a simple process. Whitening products contain one of two tooth bleaches (hydrogen peroxide or carbamide peroxide). These bleaches break stains into smaller pieces, which makes the color less concentrated and your teeth brighter.

## Does Whitening Work on All Teeth?

No, which is why it's important to talk to your dentist before deciding to whiten your teeth, as whiteners may not correct all types of discoloration. For example, yellow teeth will probably bleach well, brown teeth may not respond as well and teeth with gray tones may not bleach at all. Whitening will not work on caps, [veneers](#), [crowns](#) or [fillings](#). It also won't be effective if your tooth discoloration is caused by [medications](#) or a [tooth injury](#).

## Are There Any Side Effects from Teeth Whitening?

Some people who use teeth whiteners may experience [tooth sensitivity](#). That happens when the peroxide in the whitener gets through the enamel to the soft layer of dentin and irritates the nerve of your tooth. In most cases the sensitivity is temporary. You can delay treatment, then try again.

Overuse of whiteners can also damage the tooth enamel or gums, so be sure to follow directions and talk to your dentist.