

WHICH WHITE IS RIGHT?

There are two main methods of tooth whitening—in-office and at-home. Whitening is performed by applying a high concentration of oxidizing agent to the teeth. The whitening agents break down the accumulated organic debris within the crystalline structure of the enamel. This debris is what causes the teeth to appear darker or yellow. All methods are generally safe and cause no permanent harm to the teeth or soft tissues.

Effectiveness varies by procedure, competence of the individual doing the procedure, concentration of oxidizing agent, patient compliance, and individual enamel structure. All whitening procedures will be more effective if you have had your teeth cleaned and polished before you begin. One variation that has been shown to have little or no benefit (despite the marketing hype) is “laser bleaching.” Any type of heat will speed up the oxidation process, but it does not improve effectiveness or longevity.

Laser or heat will cause some additional trauma to the nerve tissue inside the teeth (degree of harm is debateable). All whitening agents can cause some temporary sensitivity, which varies by individual, strength, and application method.

Occasionally the gums will also bleach, but this is temporary and the color returns within a few minutes.

Over-the-counter whitening procedures vary widely. I have patients who have had some success with some of these, and others who were completely disappointed.

The only way to know is to give it a try. If it works for you, great. Whitening toothpastes and rinses are not effective, and I have had several patients who have developed some long-term sensitivity from some of the whitening toothpastes. Their marketing is designed to sell, and there is no accountability. I would encourage you to avoid those. I have used full strength hydrogen peroxide rinse over the last ten years with no adverse effects, but the value is hard to measure (I think it has helped maintain my original whitening). I just like it.