

Teeth Whitening Tips and Trends

Want whiter teeth? Make sure your smile sends the right message!



In our youth- and status-obsessed society, the quickest way to convey vitality and glamour is by flashing a dazzling smile—a trait that is easily attainable, thanks to relatively affordable pro teeth whitening (\$400 to \$650 per treatment). Despite the popularity of peroxide, however, perceptions of the ideal shade of pale vary.

According to experts, two classes of consumers have emerged. While one group gravitates toward bleach-white teeth the same way they do a Balenciaga City or Hermès Birkin—to them, a blinding grin is the ultimate symbol of wealth—the other desires a less obvious look with subtle imperfections to maintain character. Those who seek the former—the I-paid-for-these glow-stick variety—tend to obsess over their image, says Beverly Hills dentist Alan E. Zweig, DMD, FAGD. “There are people who want to dot every i and cross every t as far as how they look, and they’re the ones who overdo it with their teeth,” he says. And the movie-star finish this crew is after is more imagined than it is real, adds Zweig, who cites the cream-colored teeth of George Clooney and the “gummy smile” of Julia Roberts as frequent requests.

“Sometimes what patients say they want is different from what they actually envision,” says New York cosmetic dentist Michael Apa, DDS. “It can be tricky figuring out what type of white they’re going for.”

Many cosmetic dentists view customer satisfaction as their ultimate goal, even if it means violating their own artistic vision. “I had a guy come in recently who wanted his teeth whiter than white,” recalls Zweig. Because peroxide will lift the color of your natural teeth only so much (about eight to 10 shades), Zweig did bonding, a process that involves fusing a high-density plastic onto enamel. “I had to order the whitest color available because

I don’t keep it in the office,” he says. “The patient is happy as a clam, but I think it looks ridiculous. It’s frustrating to me as a cosmetic dentist, because I feel like I could have given him much more attractive results.”

If a believable white is your aim—your own teeth, simply more brilliant—a professional whitening treatment every six months or regular at-home whitening applications can achieve that (Crest 3D White Whitestrips was the unanimous favorite among our experts). But if you also crave straighter, better-shaped teeth, don’t shy away from bonding or veneers. Unlike the materials of yesterday that “looked like they were opened out of a box and glued on,” today’s can better mimic the gradation of color from the gum line to the biting edge, says Apa. “The idea is to make the smile invisible and harmonious with the rest of the face.” According to him, the most aesthetically pleasing formula incorporates the position, color, contour, texture, and translucency of real teeth.

To keep the shade of white genuine, New York cosmetic dentist Lana Rozenberg, DDS, says she matches veneers to the whites of the eyes: “If the teeth are whiter than that, they’re too white; they’ll draw the eye to the mouth like a flashlight.”

The counterintuitive truth is that authentic-looking veneers are costlier due to the greater expertise and time required. Thus, unlike before—when a chiseled block of whitewashed teeth indicated elevated status—an imperfect ivory smile is now deemed more sophisticated. “If you want to see a truly beautiful smile, look at Kate Middleton,” says Zweig. “Her teeth have a natural translucency at the edge, and they’re not too perfect or symmetrical. That’s classy.”

If the metallic shock of tooth sensitivity that some patients experience post-whitening gives you chills just imagining it, the good news is that brighter-looking teeth can be achieved via some nice old-fashioned smoke-and-mirror tricks, compliments of your cosmetic bag and hair colorist.

Your lipstick color can affect how white—or yellow—your teeth appear, says makeup artist Tina Turnbow. “Coral, even though it’s trendy these days, isn’t always the most flattering to teeth,” she says. “The best options are a blue-based pink or red.” To downplay discoloration, also avoid warm browns, as these can amplify yellowish teeth.

“Warm browns like orange or brick red look beautiful on darker skin tones, but if you don’t have white teeth, they can be detrimental to your smile,” says celebrity makeup artist Matin. If you’re determined to rock a cocoa-based color, go for cooler mauve-tinted browns, says Revlon makeup maven Gucci Westman, who swears by Revlon Super Lustrous Crème Lipstick in Chocolate Velvet.

Besides lipstick, wearing bronzer and blush can also enhance your smile. Turnbow suggests sweeping a neutral bronzer one shade deeper than your skin tone in a C shape from the side of your forehead to just under the cheekbone; finish with a quick brushing across the forehead and chin for an all-over sun-kissed glow. If you prefer blush over bronzer, she says to stick to healthy pinks instead of peaches, which will play up teeth stains.

Even your hair color can affect how bright your smile appears, says San Diego-based hairstylist and salon owner Jet Rhys. “Blonds might have more fun, but brunettes have the advantage,” she says, noting that teeth appear whiter when juxtaposed with darker manes. Light hair composed of one flat shade will call particular attention to off-white teeth, an effect that can be mitigated by adding sand, wheat, or vanilla highlights.