



The Dirt On Dental Discoloration

Are your teeth not as white as you remembered? See why that might be.

What Causes Tooth Discoloration?

Tooth discoloration is quite common and can result from a variety of factors, but generally falls into one of three categories: external, internal, and age-related.

External discoloration is usually due to a staining of the enamel on teeth. As enamel is translucent, stains may appear yellowish, brownish, purplish, or reddish, depending on the cause of staining.

External stains are generally caused from:

- tobacco usage (smoking or chewing)
- food and drink (tea, coffee, tomato sauce, red wine)
- tartar buildup

Tooth discoloration can also be due to **internal** factors, like:

- trauma to the tooth (bruising or breaking)
- cavities on the tooth
- medications
- dental treatment (root canal or fillings)

Tooth trauma can cause the blood vessels within the pulp of the tooth to burst and leak into the dentin below the enamel, causing a brownish appearance. Similarly, it is not uncommon for teeth to become darker before or after a root canal, as residual nerve tissue dies and stains the dentin of the tooth. Internal discoloration often makes the tooth look gray or brownish.

Age can also play a big factor in tooth discoloration. As we age, the translucent enamel on our teeth that make them appear white can wear away. The thinner the layer of enamel, the more visible the yellow layer of dentin below that enamel will appear. The wearing away of this enamel also makes the tooth itself more brittle and susceptible to external staining.

How Can My Dentist Treat Tooth Discoloration?

Treatment for tooth discoloration can vary, usually depending on the type and reason for the discoloration.

External Discoloration Treatment

Superficial staining of the enamel can frequently be reduced using over-the-counter whitening toothpaste, whitening mouthwash, or whitening strips. However, some of these types of products may promote tooth sensitivity or irritation of the gums, so should be discussed with the dentist prior to usage.



When Should I See a Dentist?

Everyone should be visiting the dentist at least once a year for an exam and usually twice a year for a cleaning. General discontent about overall tooth discoloration can usually be addressed during this routine exam.

However, if a single tooth has changed color or has become discolored after a trauma, notify the dentist immediately as the sooner the tooth is treated, the fewer the complications, and the better the outcome.

Alternatively, your dentist can often provide whitening treatment at the clinic or may send you home with at-home, customized whitening treatment. In-office treatment generally contains higher level of whitening agents, like hydrogen peroxide than at-home or over-the-counter treatment, so tend to last longer than other options. It may take a couple of weeks before results can be seen from take-home treatments provided by the dentist.

Internal Discoloration Treatment

Though the same whitening treatment options used for external discoloration can be used when trying to remove discoloration due to internal factors, these treatments aren't typically very effective. Rather, dentists can frequently provide internal whitening, where the whitening agent is applied directly to the inside of the tooth, then sealed using a filling or other restoration.



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