

Home is where the start is

Vicky Eldridge reports on the trend for at home teeth whitening and asks whether consumers are putting themselves at risk in the quest for pearly whites

→ The at home beauty market is booming with more and more people using devices and treatments to improve their appearance in the comfort of their own home, and cosmetic dentistry is no exception.

The economic climate has undoubtedly had an impact on the increased demand for at home procedures, which offer a cheap alternative to in-clinic treatments. In dentistry the 'fear factor' may also play a part. Figures from the NHS Information Centre show that 19 per cent of women and 10 per cent of men suffer from extreme dental anxiety and as many as 54 per cent of women and 39 per cent of men are nervous about going to the dentist.

However, according to the British Academy of Cosmetic Dentists, a third of the population is concerned about the appearance of their teeth and having a whiter, brighter smile ranks high on the list. But with the cost of many cosmetic dental procedures being perceived to be out of reach for many people, they are turning to cheaper alternatives - but at what real cost?

THE WHITE STUFF

Along with lines and wrinkles our teeth can be a huge indicator of our age and can dramatically affect the way we feel about ourselves and how others perceive us. Psychological research has shown that we form a snap judgment on people within a few seconds of meeting them and more specific dental research has shown just how important the state of our teeth is in making that first impression.

A report by Mintel in 2009 showed that when it comes to oral health, stained or yellowing teeth ranked top of consumers health concerns, with four in 10 Brits being concerned about the colour of their teeth while only a quarter were worried about real health issues such as cavities, caries and receding gums. It is no surprise then that teeth whitening has become one of the most popular cosmetic dental procedures as it offers a quick and simple way to improve the aesthetics of your smile. Yet there is a

vast difference between the 'take home' and in clinic procedures carried out under the guidance of a dentist and the products you can buy on the high street or over the net.

At home teeth whitening has never been more popular, but with over the counter or internet-purchased whitening kits being largely ineffective and, in some cases, potentially harmful, consumers could actually be putting themselves at risk of damaging their teeth and gums in their quest for a more beautiful smile.

The British Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry has issued a number of warnings about dangerous levels of bleach in take-home whitening kits. EU recommendations state that the chemicals used to whiten teeth (hydrogen peroxide or carbamide peroxide) should not exceed the six per cent level for hydrogen peroxide (18 per cent for carbamide peroxide) if used at home, even when prescribed by dentists, yet many websites sell teeth whitening kits that contain chemical levels that greatly exceed that.

Phillips hygienist Mhari Coxon says, "You should never try and buy a teeth whitening kit over the internet. You very much get what you pay for with whitening so if something seems too good to be true it probably is. Some of the kits that are available have the wrong kind of peroxide and can actually take the enamel off your teeth."

An investigation by Trading Standards discovered that 18 out of 20 tested DIY tooth whitening kits contained illegal levels of hydrogen peroxide. Their advice, and the advice of the European Union Scientific Committee on Consumer Products, to anyone seeking teeth whitening treatment, is to consult a qualified dentist who will ensure there are no underlying oral health issues like periodontal disease, which mean you are not suitable for the treatment.

Professor Andrew Eder, clinical director of The London Tooth Wear Centre says, "I have concerns over some of the over the counter stuff because we don't really

know what is in it. There are also some crazy methods of bleaching that you see on the internet, such as mixing strawberries and lemons together, but you can actually take the enamel away doing things like this. It is uncontrolled and not sensible in my view. The best method of whitening is home bleaching under the guidance of a dentist. It is a very controlled and gentle way of whitening and patients very rarely get any sensitivity."

Professor Eder is not alone as professional at home whitening is the most popular method currently used by dentists. A survey carried out by Philips at the BDTA Dental Showcase 2011 showed that 99 per cent offer at home tooth whitening through their practice, compared to only 60 per cent who offer in clinic whitening.

The treatment involves wearing a customised tray containing a whitening solution, at night over a period of 10-14 days. It not only removes the surface stains but can penetrate the enamel to bleach deep-set stains that over-the-counter systems can't touch. The results are also longer lasting and more predictable although the only downside is they are not instant as with in chair whitening.

BACK TO BASICS

Unlike some other markets, where the trend for at home treatments is potentially taking consumers away from the professional market, in dentistry, at home regimens are an essential part of the process.

Many of us are so preoccupied with the cosmetics of our smile that we forget that the real secret to healthy, attractive looking teeth really does start at home.

If you want to invest in your smile, stepping up your at home oral health regime is the best thing you can do. It will not only ensure that your teeth and gums are healthy, and therefore looking their best, but will also lay the foundations for improved outcomes from any cosmetic dental work you choose to have done - there is no point having dental treatments

to straighten or whiten your teeth if you have plaque, tooth decay or bleeding gums.

"You wouldn't buy a BMW and never take it for an MOT and hope it just runs ok", says Mhari. "If you are spending money on improving your teeth you have to make sure you look after them afterwards."