Risks Involved With Teeth Whitening | Core Dental

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Details:

Teeth whitening is generally considered a safe cosmetic treatment when it is done correctly under the guidance of a dental professional. The most common side effects are temporary tooth sensitivity and gum irritation, and most arise from incorrect or inappropriate use. At Core Dental we suggest you have your teeth and gums checked before any whitening, so your dentist can explain which option suits you and what to expect. Results and side effects vary from person to person.

What is teeth whitening?

Teeth whitening is a cosmetic dental treatment that helps brighten tooth enamel by removing staining. Most whitening products contain a form of peroxide, either hydrogen peroxide or carbamide peroxide, which helps break down the stains on your teeth. Results vary from one person to another because of factors such as your starting tooth shade, your age and the type of discolouration.

What causes tooth discolouration?

There are several reasons why teeth become stained or discoloured. The most common are:

diet, including coffee, tea, red wine, tomatoes, soft drinks and curries

smoking

poor oral hygiene

developmental defects

certain medications, including some antibiotics

What whitening options are there?

In-chair whitening, such as Zoom whitening

In-chair whitening gives the most immediate result and can take around 90 minutes. A highly concentrated whitening gel is applied to your teeth by a dental professional and activated by a light to speed up the process. The shade change varies between people.

Take-home trays and whitening gel

Custom-fitted trays are worn either during the day or at night. Results are usually seen within a couple of weeks, although this varies.

Over-the-counter products

These generally contain lower concentrations than professionally prescribed take-home kits and can take much longer to work. Other chemicals included in some over-the-counter products have the potential to damage enamel, especially if they are used incorrectly.

Whitening toothpastes

These may help remove minor surface staining but generally will not achieve a significant whitening result. Whitening toothpastes can also be abrasive, which may damage enamel and increase sensitivity in some people.

What are the risks of teeth whitening?

The main risks are:

Sensitivity. During and after whitening you may notice increased sensitivity to temperature or pressure. This is generally related to the concentration of the whitening agent and usually settles within a couple of days.

Gum irritation. This can happen more often with high-concentration gels, or if the gums are not adequately protected during treatment. Dental professionals know how to protect your gums whether whitening is done in the chair or at home.

Most risks arise from inappropriate or incorrect use. When whitening is used correctly and in consultation with your dentist, it is generally considered safe, and the after-effects some people experience are usually mild and temporary.

Who is more likely to experience sensitivity?

People with receding gums, cracks in their teeth or failing restorations may be more likely to experience sensitivity, because these conditions can allow whitening agents to reach deeper into the tooth. This is one reason we recommend an examination before whitening.

Is whitening permanent?

No. Whitening is not a permanent fix and needs to be maintained. You will need to follow up your first treatment at home as your dentist advises, and avoid foods and drinks that stain teeth.

How can you plan your care with our team?

A useful first step is to tell us about your concern, any symptoms and your goals when you book. Bring relevant medical information and a current list of medicines. Our team can then check your teeth, gums, bite and surrounding tissues, take imaging when it is clinically appropriate and explain which options suit you.

It is reasonable to ask what the recommended approach is meant to achieve, whether there are alternatives, and what preparation, aftercare and risks are involved. Time, fees and maintenance vary with each person's diagnosis, and a written treatment plan helps you compare stages and payment arrangements before you go ahead.

Call 000 immediately for uncontrollable bleeding, difficulty breathing or swallowing, a serious facial injury or other life-threatening symptoms. For severe tooth pain or swelling without these emergency signs, contact your dental practice promptly.

The published risk list, in full

Whitening risks are usually described vaguely. The state health advice gives a short, specific list, and each item tells you something you can act on.

The Victorian Department of Health's risks for teeth whitening, verbatim:

"Tooth decay, fillings, crowns, bridges, veneers, false teeth and some types of discolouration do not whiten."

This is the risk people feel most and expect least. If you have a filling or crown on a front tooth, whitening the teeth around it makes the restoration look darker by comparison — and the restoration cannot be whitened to match. The Department's general advice before cosmetic treatment is to "find out what is causing the unsatisfactory appearance of your teeth", which is exactly the step that catches this before it happens.

"Commonly causes temporary tooth sensitivity."

Commonly, and temporary. The Australian Dental Association describes the same thing: "The most common side-effects are transient tooth sensitivity and soft tissue irritation during or immediately following treatment."

"If the gel overflows, it can cause temporary gum irritation."

Which is an argument for a custom-fitted tray over a generic one. On the chemistry, the ADA notes that "direct exposure of the skin, eyes and mucous membranes to hydrogen peroxide may cause severe irritation or burns" — the concentrations used in a clinic are well above anything sold to consumers, which is why containment matters.

"Whitening is not permanent."

Not a side effect, but the most commonly misunderstood limit. No source we have read gives a figure for how long results last, and we are not going to invent one.

Before any of it, there is a prerequisite. "Cosmetic dentistry procedures can improve the appearance of your teeth and your smile. But the first step is to make sure your teeth and mouth are in good health." The Department's instruction is unambiguous about order: "Treat any disease first. Your health is the priority."

Whitening an unhealthy mouth is not a safe shortcut, and the examination that precedes it is not a formality. The ADA puts the same requirement in regulatory terms: whitening "should only be performed if the treatment can be justified, and after a comprehensive dental examination has been conducted by a Dental Practitioner".

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Cosmetic dentistry and teeth whitening, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 12 December 2025); Australian Dental Association, Policy Statement 2.2.8 - Teeth Whitening (Bleaching) By Persons other than Dental Practitioners, ada.org.au (the policy states its last review as September 2025). Both accessed 6 November 2026.

Who assesses the risk, and what you should be told

The published framework puts suitability in the hands of a registered practitioner, and sets out what you are entitled to be told before agreeing. Both are worth knowing because the risks above are manageable when assessed and not when assumed.

On who can assess it. The ADA: "only registered dental practitioners have the expertise to assess whether bleaching is safe for individual patients, to recommend the most appropriate technique and materials, and to provide treatment that meets regulated safety and quality standards of care."

It also records where whitening is now offered by people who are not registered practitioners: "beauty and hair salons, shopping mall kiosks, dedicated teeth whitening salons, or via mobile services that

travel to a location convenient to the consumer." And on the language used in that market: "Many non-dental practitioner teeth whitening services claim that their practitioners are 'teeth whitening specialists' with the knowledge or training to perform teeth whitening procedures safely."

The legal line that separates the two. Products up to "hydrogen peroxide 3-6% and carbamide peroxide 9-18%" are Schedule 5 and may be sold to consumers with safety warnings; above "6% hydrogen peroxide or 18% carbamide peroxide" they "may only be sold, supplied and used by registered dental practitioners as part of their dental practise", under provisions "formalised in all state and territory poisons legislation". Schedule 10, the higher category, "lists substances of such danger to health as to warrant prohibition of their sale, supply and use other than in specified exempt circumstances".

And there is published guidance binding practitioners themselves. The ADA records that in August 2021 the Dental Board of Australia published guidance for registered dental practitioners on using and supplying teeth whitening products, which "cites the Poisons Standard, Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) advertising requirements, and Australian Consumer Law", and states that "You can only use teeth whitening products in line with your training and the law".

If a light or laser is used , there is a standard and in some states a licence. "AS/NZS 4173:2018, Safe use of lasers and intense light sources in health care specifies requirements for dental practices and the cosmetics industry, including required standards of training." And: "All registered dental practitioners with appropriate levels of training and competence are permitted to undertake dental procedures using Class 4 lasers, but Western Australian, Queensland, Victorian, and Tasmania legislation requires that practitioners in these states first obtain a licence to do so from the appropriate state regulatory authority."

Victoria is named in that list, so in this state a practitioner using a Class 4 laser needs a state licence as well as the training.

What to ask before agreeing to anything. The Department's own list of questions for a cosmetic consultation: "What options are available and the pros and the cons of each option."; "What results can be reasonably expected."; "What costs, time and money, are involved and if payment options are available."; "Any possible side effects or complications."

And the pace you are entitled to. "If it is a simple procedure, it may be done on the day. If it is a complex procedure, you may need time to think about your options, or see specialists over multiple visits."

One factor in the decision that is about you rather than the treatment. The Department asks you to consider "how much effort you would be prepared to put into looking after your teeth at home in the future", because "most cosmetic dental treatment requires extra care at home to prevent tooth decay, gum disease or other problems. Cleaning the area well and having a healthy diet is essential."

Sources: Australian Dental Association, Policy Statement 2.2.8 - Teeth Whitening (Bleaching) By Persons other than Dental Practitioners, ada.org.au (the policy states its last review as September 2025); Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Cosmetic dentistry and teeth whitening, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 12 December 2025). Both accessed 6 November 2026.

Frequently asked questions

Is teeth whitening safe?

Whitening is generally considered safe when it is done correctly with the guidance of a dental professional. Some people notice sensitivity or gum irritation, which is usually mild and temporary. Your dentist can check whether whitening suits your teeth and gums.

How long does sensitivity last after whitening?

Sensitivity is usually mild and temporary and often settles within a couple of days. If it lasts longer or is uncomfortable, contact your dentist so they can check your teeth and advise you.

Are over-the-counter whitening kits as safe as professional whitening?

Over-the-counter products are different from professional treatment. Some contain other chemicals that may damage enamel if used incorrectly, and they cannot be tailored to your teeth. A dentist can recommend an option after examining your mouth.

Can I whiten my teeth if I have fillings or crowns?

Whitening agents lighten natural tooth enamel and do not change the colour of fillings or crowns, so your dentist may talk with you about this before you start. An examination will show which option suits your teeth and any restorations.

How long do whitening results last?

Results vary from person to person and depend on your habits, such as diet and smoking. Whitening needs to be maintained, so follow your dentist's aftercare advice. Read more in our article on how long teeth whitening lasts .

Will my fillings and crowns whiten too?

No, and this is the risk people notice most. The Victorian Department of Health lists it first: "Tooth decay, fillings, crowns, bridges, veneers, false teeth and some types of discolouration do not whiten." Whitening the surrounding teeth can make an existing restoration look darker by comparison.

Is sensitivity afterwards normal?

Yes. Whitening "commonly causes temporary tooth sensitivity". The Australian Dental Association describes "transient tooth sensitivity and soft tissue irritation during or immediately following treatment".

Can it irritate my gums?

"If the gel overflows, it can cause temporary gum irritation." The ADA notes that "direct exposure of the skin, eyes and mucous membranes to hydrogen peroxide may cause severe irritation or burns", which is why containment and a well-fitting tray matter.

How long will the result last?

The published advice does not say. What it does say is that "whitening is not permanent", and no source we have read gives a duration — so we are not going to quote one.

Does my mouth need to be healthy first?

Yes, and the Department puts it before everything else: "the first step is to make sure your teeth and mouth are in good health", and "treat any disease first. Your health is the priority."

Who is qualified to say whether whitening is safe for me?

"Only registered dental practitioners have the expertise to assess whether bleaching is safe for individual patients, to recommend the most appropriate technique and materials, and to provide treatment that meets regulated safety and quality standards of care." The ADA's position is that whitening should follow "a comprehensive dental examination ... conducted by a Dental Practitioner".

What about whitening offered at a salon or kiosk?

The ADA records that whitening is "increasingly offered by unregulated, unqualified non dental practitioners in settings such as beauty and hair salons, shopping mall kiosks, dedicated teeth whitening salons, or via mobile services", and that many such services claim their practitioners are "teeth whitening specialists".

What are the legal limits on concentration?

Up to "hydrogen peroxide 3-6% and carbamide peroxide 9-18%" may be sold direct to consumers with safety warnings. Above "6% hydrogen peroxide or 18% carbamide peroxide", products "may only be sold, supplied and used by registered dental practitioners as part of their dental practise".

Is a whitening laser regulated?

Yes, and Victoria is specifically named. "AS/NZS 4173:2018, Safe use of lasers and intense light sources in health care specifies requirements for dental practices", and while all registered practitioners with appropriate training may use Class 4 lasers, "Western Australian, Queensland, Victorian, and Tasmania legislation requires that practitioners in these states first obtain a licence to do so from the appropriate state regulatory authority".

What should I ask before agreeing?

The Department's list: "What options are available and the pros and the cons of each option."; "What results can be reasonably expected."; "What costs, time and money, are involved and if payment options are available."; "Any possible side effects or complications."

Do I have to decide on the day?

No. "If it is a simple procedure, it may be done on the day. If it is a complex procedure, you may need time to think about your options, or see specialists over multiple visits."

Is there anything I am committing to afterwards?

Home care. The Department asks you to consider "how much effort you would be prepared to put into looking after your teeth at home in the future", because "most cosmetic dental treatment requires extra care at home to prevent tooth decay, gum disease or other problems".

Related services and further reading

Teeth whitening

Cosmetic dentistry

All about teeth whitening

In-chair whitening versus take-home whitening kits

How long does teeth whitening last?

Why should I go to the dentist for teeth whitening?

Is charcoal whitening safe?

4 things to avoid if you have sensitive teeth

My child's adult teeth have white spots on them

How can we help?

If you are thinking about whitening, our team can help at any of our nine Core Dental clinics. Call 13 13 16 or book online, and your dentist will examine your teeth and gums and talk through your options. You can also read about what to expect at your first Core Dental appointment .

Core Dental at a glance

Nine Core Dental clinics across Melbourne: Southbank, South Melbourne, Caroline Springs, Carrum Downs, Epping, Wyndham, Berwick, Bayside and Glenferrie.

Open six days a week: Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings.

We quote before treatment starts and offer interest-free payment plans.

Call 13 13 16 or book online.

Contact Core Dental

Phone	13 13 16
Booking	Online through coredental.com.au, or call 13 13 16
Hours	Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm, Saturday mornings, Sunday closed
Clinics	Southbank , South Melbourne , Caroline Springs , Carrum Downs , Epping , Wyndham , Berwick , Bayside , Glenferrie

This article is general in nature and does not replace advice from a registered dental practitioner who has examined you. Results, recovery times and potential risks vary for each individual. This information is intended for people over 18. Seek advice from a qualified, AHPRA-registered practitioner before proceeding.

What are the main risks of teeth whitening?

The main risks are temporary tooth sensitivity and gum irritation. They are more likely with high-concentration gels or when the gums are not protected. Core Dental dentists explain the risks and protect your gums during treatment.

What causes teeth to become stained?

Common causes are coffee, tea, red wine, tomatoes, soft drinks and curries, smoking, poor oral hygiene, developmental defects and some medications such as certain antibiotics. A Core Dental dentist can assess the cause of your discolouration.

Which people are more likely to get sensitivity from whitening?

People with receding gums, cracked teeth or failing restorations may be more likely to feel sensitivity, because whitening agents can reach deeper into the tooth. Core Dental recommends an examination before whitening.

What is the difference between in-chair and take-home whitening?

In-chair whitening applies a concentrated gel with a light and can take about 90 minutes. Take-home whitening uses custom-fitted trays worn during the day or at night, with results usually seen within a couple of weeks.

Do whitening toothpastes whiten teeth significantly?

They may remove minor surface staining but generally will not achieve significant whitening. Some whitening toothpastes are abrasive and may damage enamel or increase sensitivity. Core Dental dentists can recommend suitable options.

Is teeth whitening permanent?

No. Whitening needs to be maintained, so your Core Dental dentist will advise on follow-up care at home and on avoiding foods and drinks that stain teeth. Results vary from person to person.

How many Core Dental clinics are there?

Core Dental has nine clinics across Melbourne: Southbank, South Melbourne, Caroline Springs, Carrum Downs, Epping, Wyndham, Berwick, Bayside and Glenferrie. Call 13 13 16 or book online to find the clinic nearest you.

When are Core Dental clinics open?

Our clinics are open Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings, and closed on Sunday. Saturday hours finish at 1.30pm, and Bayside opens at 8.30am on Saturdays. Call 13 13 16 to confirm your clinic.