SCF Dental Hygiene Associate Professor Gives Advice About Tooth Bleaching

If you’re like many people on the quest for a brighter smile, you may have noticed commercials promoting whitening products that promise the pearly whites you’ve always wanted.

Here’s some free advice from SCF Dental Hygiene Associate Professor Pam Kennard, chapter author of “Tooth Bleaching” in the 11th edition of “Clinical Practice of the Dental Hygienist,” one of the most respected and widely used dental hygiene textbooks in the nation.

Q. How do I know whether whitening will be effective on my teeth?
A. Undergoing a dental examination before whitening to rule out discoloration due to cavities or restorations is recommended. If you have cavities, the whitening procedure in the area of the cavity will be ineffective and you likely will experience sensitivity. Since dental restorations are also unaffected by whitening procedures, whitening can actually draw attention to the darker restorations, making your smile less attractive. You can either decide not to whiten your teeth or plan to change your restorations to a lighter color before whitening.

Q. What are my options for tooth whitening?
A. Depending on the results you’d like, you can choose from several whitening products on the market. The most obvious and cheapest whitening products are toothpastes and mouth rinses that prevent and remove stains with normal brushing. In contrast to whitening toothpastes and rinses, professional procedures and some over-the-counter products change the internal color of the tooth by permeating the tooth structure, breaking up the stain molecules in the small channels of the tooth and oxidizing the tooth to create a whiter color. Over-the-counter products, such as whitening strips, are available at a minimal cost. While over-the-counter products can save money, there are also advantages to professional whitening products available at the dentist’s office.

Q. What is the difference between over-the-counter and professional whitening products?
A. Over-the-counter products that have a lower concentration of hydrogen peroxide are weaker than professional products available at your dentist’s office. Patients who want faster results can choose an in-office procedure that uses light to activate hydrogen peroxide followed by the use of take-home custom trays with solution to continue the whitening process. For a slower, gentler procedure that is just as effective, patients can opt to use only the custom trays for a longer time period. Custom trays provide the benefit of a better fit to keep the whitening product on the teeth longer, which is key to getting the best results.

Q. How long does it take to see results?
A. Professional whitening procedures usually take about four to six weeks for best results. Over-the-counter products may take longer with varied results depending on the product you used and whether it stayed on the tooth long enough during treatments.

Q. How long do results last?
A. The results of professional tooth whitening products can last a year or more. To keep your teeth looking brighter, longer, avoid tobacco products and stain-causing foods or beverages such as tea, coffee and red wine.

Q. What safety precautions should I take during the whitening procedure?
A. Over-the-counter whitening products are safe when used as directed. Professional procedures should be monitored by your dentist who will compare your teeth to a shade guide to determine when your teeth have reached the maximum whiteness. Your dentist will advise you when to stop the procedure to prevent over-whitening, which can change the enamel and damage the tooth’s structure.

Q. What are the side effects?
A. Common side effects of tooth whitening are sensitivity and peeling gums, but the side effects usually go away when you stop using the whitening product for a few days. It’s best to resume using the product every other day or every two days to minimize the discomfort. If you’re using custom trays, you can decrease sensitivity by adding a toothpaste with potassium nitrate or fluoride to your whitening routine. Toothpaste that contains potassium nitrate is the most effective.

Q. What is the cost for whitening products?
A. Over-the-counter products can cost as little as $25, depending on the number of days you choose to do the whitening process. Custom trays with professional whitening and desensitizing products can range from $99- $300. Light-activated whitening may be as low as $199 for one in-office visit or as high as $575, which could include custom trays with whitening and desensitizing products. The cost of professional products usually includes follow-up monitoring by a dentist.

SOURCE: Pam Kennard, SCF dental hygiene associate professor, is a registered nurse and dental hygienist who actively participates in community outreach projects to provide oral screenings for underserved children. She is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Leadership and Education with a specialization in higher education administration.

More About SCF’s Dental Hygiene Program
SCF students gain hands-on experience by providing dental hygiene services to the public at the Dental Hygiene Clinic at SCF Bradenton, 5840 26th St. West, building 2. Hours: 8 a.m. to noon and 1 to 5 p.m. on selected days during the week. For more information about services and fees, call 941-752-5335.

The Dental Hygiene Program, in partnership with SCF’s Corporate and Community Development division, will offer “Local Anesthesia: A Course for Dental Hygienists” to fulfill a new state requirement that allows registered dental hygienists to administer local anesthesia under the direct supervision of a licensed dentist. The course will be from 8 to 5 p.m., Thursday-Sunday, Jan. 17-20. The fee is $1,495. The registration deadline is Jan. 11. For more information about eligibility requirements, contact Program Director Anita Weaver at 941-752-3330 at weavercjc@scf.edu.

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