



MAKE A SMILE
The best DIY tooth whitener we tested really works, but it has a few drawbacks.

Whiten up!

Which at-home tooth whiteners give you the best results? Our tests show differences among the kits.

It used to be that if your teeth turned yellow or were stained by tea or wine, you had to grin and bear it. Or you could shell out hundreds of dollars to a dentist for professional tooth whitening. Now you can go to a drugstore and buy a white smile—or at least the promise of one—for as little as \$17.

The do-it-yourself kits at stores have the same peroxide bleaching agents that your dentist uses but in weaker concentrations. But can they give you decent results?

We tested eight kits in our labs with the help of 82 willing staffers in search of brighter smiles. First step: a thorough checkup by a dentist (teeth with visible fillings, veneers, or bonding aren't good candidates for whitening). Then our technicians used a machine called a colorimeter to assess each person's "before" tooth shade.

We gave one whitening kit to each participant with instructions to follow

package directions. The kits we tested included five strip products, two trays prefilled with gel, and a tray with insertable peroxide foam strips. All are available over the counter at stores except Crest Whitestrips Supreme, which is sold in dentists' offices or on the Web. Two kits were store brands from Target and CVS. Prices ranged from \$17 to \$50.

Volunteers were asked to keep detailed notes about their experience, which lasted from five days to three weeks, depending on the product. About half said they felt some irritation or discomfort, ranging from temporary tooth and gum sensitivity, which all the packages warn of, to "excruciating pain," according to one tester.

When we measured the "after" shade, we found that most of the products made teeth whiter to some degree. But some worked better than others, and some were easier to use. On the next pages, the products we tested are listed in order of how well they performed.

Should you go to a pro?

Professional tooth bleaching at a dentist's office has its advantages. All you have to do is sit there and open your mouth and in less than 90 minutes—voilà!—whiter teeth. The drawback is the cost, from a few hundred dollars to more than \$1,000. And insurance usually won't cover it.

The bleaching agents are the same as those in the do-it-yourself kits, but they're stronger. A dentist isolates your gums and coats your teeth with a concentrated peroxide solution, sometimes shining a high-intensity light into your mouth. (You might have heard about light-enhanced whitening, but some researchers now question whether such light accelerates the whitening process.)

A dentist can also make custom-sized gel trays for you to wear at home. They can be stronger than drugstore whiteners but weaker than an in-chair job.

One option you should definitely skip is mall kiosks that offer whitening at a fraction of the cost of a professional treatment by a dentist. They're not usually staffed by dentists, though some have their staff wear scrubs or lab coats. (Sneaky, huh?) Yet they dispense chemicals that could permanently affect your teeth and gums. In fact, Tennessee has declared the practice illegal; other states, including Alabama and South Carolina, are also taking action.

winning whitener



Crest Whitestrips Supreme

Price \$50
Type Strips
How long you wear them 21 days; 30 minutes, twice a day
Testers' notes Our panelists generally gave the strips high marks, and this product was No. 1 in whitening power. But a few panelists complained about the time commitment. "It is a pain because you have to remember to use it twice a day for almost a full month," said one person. And about half of the testers reported higher-than-normal sensitivity.

runners-up



Listerine Whitening Quick Dissolving Strips

Price \$24
Type Strips
How long you wear them 14 days; until they dissolve, twice a day
Testers' notes Despite the strips' strong showing in our colorimeter test, some users were annoyed by the residue they left. "Only three of 11 said they'd use them again. "It took 50 minutes to dissolve, and I had to push it off with my tongue," one said. (The box says it takes 5 to 10 minutes.) Half the testers griped that the strips ripped as they opened the package.



Crest Whitestrips Premium

Price \$35
Type Strips
How long you wear them 7 days; 30 minutes, twice a day
Testers' notes Most found the strips easy to use, but not everyone was wowed with the results. "Noticed a difference, but not dramatic," one tester said. Users were almost evenly split about whether the effect was worth the trouble of putting on the strips twice a day. A little more than half of our panelists said that they would use the product again.



Crest Whitestrips Advanced Seal

Price \$45
Type Strips
How long you wear them 14 days; 30 minutes, once a day
Testers' notes Most of our panelists liked the way these strips adhered to their teeth. Just be sure to "get it right the first time," one user warned, because they're not easy to remove if you get it wrong. Our testers liked that the strips are used just once a day. Most said they'd try them again.



Aquafresh White Trays

Price \$37
Type Trays
How long you wear them 7 days; 30 to 45 minutes, once a day
Testers' notes A few panelists experienced some gum pain. And a couple of them cited problems with fit, though one conceded, "I guess it's hard to have one tray fit everyone's mouth." But the consensus was that the taste wasn't bad (many products left a yucky taste in people's mouths), and about half said they'd use the product again.

:(NOT SO HOT

- Target Whitening Dissolving Strips, \$17
- CVS Easy Fit Whitening Trays, \$30
- iWhite Light-Activated Teeth Whitening Kit, \$38

None of these kits had much whitening power. And some testers complained that Target's strips stuck to the inside of their lips or felt slimy. Many testers said they had pain in their mouth or gums from the CVS Easy Fit tray. The iWhite tray juts out of your mouth and has a blinking light. One user said he hid from his family while wearing it; another said it made him gag.



QUICK CONSULT

with Steven A. Ghareeb, D.D.S., a dentist in private practice in West Virginia and a spokesman for the Academy of General Dentistry

Who is a good candidate for at-home whitening?

All of these products are designed to be used on a healthy smile. If you have decay or irregular tooth surfaces, whitening can cause extreme sensitivity and/or splotchy results. Bleach won't be effective on fillings, crowns, veneers, or bridges. And we don't recommend whitening for pregnant women.

How long will my teeth stay white after a treatment?

It varies, and it's highly dependent on your habits. If you have professional whitening and you

watch what you eat and drink, it could last a lifetime. At-home kits usually require more frequent use.

Which kit works best?

The product with the highest concentration of whitening solution will generally work best.

What's the deal with whitening mouthwashes, toothpastes, and gums?

They generally treat surface stains that would normally be removed during a professional teeth cleaning. They aren't as effective as home-whitening strips or trays.

WHAT THE BOX DOESN'T TELL YOU

Talking could be a challenge.

"I couldn't speak during the half hour it was on my teeth or it dislodged." —Linda A., who tested Crest Whitestrips Supreme

You might drool. A lot.

"I had to spit out saliva every few minutes while I was wearing it." —Lauren S., who tested CVS Easy Fit Whitening Trays

Beware if it's allergy season.

"One time I sneezed, and it flew out of my mouth. Luckily it was at the end of the 30 minutes." —Cynthia O., a CVS tray tester

You can't always wear them and go.

"It says you can put it on and leave the house, but after it dissolves there's so much uncomfortable residue that you really need to brush it away." —Ina G., who tested Listerine Whitening Quick Dissolving Strips

How to deal with tooth stains

Remember how cherry popsicles turned your tongue bright red when you were a little kid? It was fun then but not so much now. Surface stains

wind up on your teeth and over time can set in and permanently darken them. While you're using a tooth whitener your teeth are

especially vulnerable to stains. "Any liquid that can stain a white carpet will eventually stain your teeth," says Steven A. Ghareeb, D.D.S.

Some major culprits

- Soft drinks (Colas, as well as clear sodas, contain acids that contribute to staining by eroding tooth enamel.)
- Red wine
- Smoking
- Sports drinks
- Blueberries
- Coffee
- Tea



STAIN CULPRITS: DORLING KINDERSLEY/GETTY IMAGES

5 ways to limit staining

Some tricks in case you just can't quit your favorites

- Drink soda or iced coffee or tea through a straw. The liquid bypasses your teeth, lessening the likelihood of surface staining.
- Go for regular cleanings at the dentist.
- Brush your teeth twice a day, especially after you eat foods that can cause stains.
- Drink water after you eat foods that stain. It might help lessen the damage.
- Avoid deeply colored foods and drinks while whitening and for two days after each treatment.