

## A perfect smile

Faster, cheaper, better ways to get one

**W**ANT TO IMPROVE YOUR smile? Recent advances make cosmetic dentistry more affordable than ever. Here are a variety of ways—big and small—to make your smile sparkle.

● **Combine cosmetic techniques** Strategic use of expensive and less expensive cosmetic techniques not only saves your smile, it saves you money. Until recently you couldn't combine techniques. Today's new, finer bonding materials make bonded teeth (less expensive) shinier and virtually indistinguishable from porcelain veneers (more expensive). That means your dentist can combine bonding with veneers or bonding with bleaching to lower the total cost of redoing a smile.

While it's hard to generalize because each case is individual, there are some

six front teeth represents a big savings over bonding or veneering the entire mouth. And it looks great, as a smiling Anna Marie Cseh, Ford's 1995 supermodel of the year, *below*, can attest. Dr. Lowenberg veneered her upper



front teeth, bonded the upper side teeth and bleached the lower ones to hide small, brownish, widely spaced teeth, *left*.

● **Bleach out stains and darkness**

Bleaching, which is relatively inexpensive, can be done in the dentist's office or at home. For in-office bleaching, the dentist treats teeth to make them more readily accepting of the bleaching solution, which is generally 30 to 35 percent hydrogen peroxide plus a catalyst. While on the teeth, the solution is exposed to a high-intensity light source that oxidizes the chemicals, helping to whiten teeth. A variety of light sources—even lasers—can be used. In-office bleaching typically requires one to three office visits and periodic touch-ups (every few years). Costs range from \$125 to \$500 per upper or lower row of teeth per visit. Laser bleaching, which can run \$500 to \$1,000 per row, takes a single visit and may be more cost effective, says New York City dentist Irwin Smigel, D.D.S.

The laser technique, however, is not yet nationally available.

At-home bleaching kits, sold only through a dentist's office, use a customized mold filled with a solution of carbamide peroxide that fits over teeth. The process takes longer (because the solution is not as strong)—usually two to three weeks of wearing a bite plate at night or during the day—and your teeth have to be touched up periodically. The cost ranges from \$200 to \$500. Bleaching works best if teeth have yellowed or browned due to external stains; internal or gray stains are not much improved.

Skip the mail-order, at-home tooth-whitening systems. "You should never try to bleach your teeth without a dental exam first," says Christine Dumas, D.D.S., a cosmetic dentist in Marina del Rey, California. "If you have cavities, exposed roots or periodontal disease, the solution can cause irreversible damage."

● **Reshape your smile** Cosmetic contouring, using a small grinding polisher, reshapes teeth to resolve discrepancies in shape, length and position. Contouring can also be used to alter age-related changes in teeth. As we get older, the edges of the front teeth get flatter and the angles more square. "Teeth can be reshaped by as much as one millimeter (about ten times the thickness of this page) without causing sensitivity or damaging the nerve," says Dr. Lowenberg. Contouring is often combined with bleaching to improve a smile

● **Fill in gaps or chips** Bonding can easily repair these minor defects, which darken a smile by revealing the interior of the mouth. A tooth that's not in alignment can have a similar effect. A process known as limited tooth movement, in which a retainer repositions the tooth in about eight to 16 weeks, can also fill in a gap.

● **Whiten your fillings** Conventional metal amalgam fillings tend to leach into tooth structure over time, leaving a gray cast. Replacing amalgam fillings with white composite fillings can brighten your smile, says Jeff Golub-Evans, D.D.S., of New York City's Dental Duplex. "The newest materials are very dense and resistant to wear. (Continued)



basic guidelines. "I usually redo the front teeth with the same technique to create a visual unit," says Marc G. Lowenberg, D.D.S., a cosmetic dentist in New York City. Trying to do any less—like just the front four teeth—leaves thicker, darker eyeteeth at the ends; the color contrast is unattractive. Other teeth can then be bonded or even bleached to match those front teeth. At \$500 to \$1,500 per veneered tooth, or \$150 to \$600 per bonded tooth, redoing only the

*(Continued)* Some even contain beads of time-release fluoride, which protect against further decay or tooth sensitivity." And because fillings are considered tooth repair (to correct damage from decay), most insurance companies reimburse for the procedure.

● **Defend teeth against dark foods** Teeth and cosmetic restorations such as bonding and the glue used on veneers are porous, so dark foods and liquids will stain them. For the first few days after bonding or porcelain veneers avoid such stainers as red wine, black coffee or tea, dark beer or juices, even dark lipsticks until the composite has fully dried. After that, moderate your intake of these darkeners. Follow your morning coffee or tea with a glass of water to rinse off residue. "It's not so much the liquid as the long-term exposure to it that can darken teeth," says Dr. Golub-Evans. Chewing a piece of sugarless gum helps stimulate the flow of saliva, which also helps remove staining particles, and the stickiness of the gum can pick up the staining film left by foods, says Debra Gray King, D.D.S., an Atlanta-based general cosmetic dentist.

## TOOTHPASTES AND BRUSHES

Whitening toothpastes are the latest trend in dental care. How well do they work? "Some of the formulas use whiteners such as titanium dioxide, which temporarily bleaches by leaving a white residue on teeth," says Dr. Christine Dumas. "Others use hydrogen peroxide, which affects only the outer, most superficial layer of tooth surface. Most tooth discoloration comes from the inner dentin layer. These over-the-counter remedies can't get to the dentin to permanently whiten the tooth." Other formulas contain special plaque removers. Plaque, a sticky film, actually holds staining particles of food on and between teeth. So if using a whitening toothpaste motivates you to brush longer and more frequently than the less-than-one-minute once-a-day the average American does, you may notice some brightening of your smile. The smile-brightener dentists *do* recommend: a good electronic toothbrush. Dr. Dumas' top pick: Optiva's Sonicare. The high-speed action of the brush head works toothpaste into the nooks and crannies of teeth, reducing the staining caused by plaque accumulation. Another toothbrush with similar technology: Teledyne WaterPik's SenSonic Plaque Removal Instrument. Yet another good choice: Braun Oral-B Ultra Plaque Remover. Regular flossing also keeps plaque from building up.