

What do your teeth say about you? Cosmetic dentistry and beauty experts say a blinding smile has become a sign of success. But it's not always a case of the brighter, the better.
By Liz Henderson.



All white now

In the past, only Hollywood stars flashed 100-kilowatt smiles – gorgeous grins that hypnotised us from the red carpet or the big screen. Now, ultra-white choppers can be spotted in the street, at the photocopier or even in the mirror.

Our obsession with brighter smiles is growing. Australian Dental Association figures show we now spend three times more on our teeth than we did in 1992, with whitening procedures, in particular, gaining in popularity. The association doesn't keep data on cosmetic dentistry and, says the Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons, reliable statistics on any cosmetic procedure aren't collected, as they are done in private settings and there is no Medicare rebate. However, research from one toothpaste manufacturer indicates almost 30 per cent of Australian households bought whitening toothpaste in the past year.

Television programs such as *Extreme Makeover* have helped fuel demand, says Sydney cosmetic dentist Dr Angelo Lazaris, who appeared on the Nine Network makeover show *Body Work*. He has seen a surge of people in his practice bringing in pictures of toothy starlets such as Jessica Simpson and Natalie Portman. "The perfect smile has become an aspirational commodity, like a nice house or a sports car," says Lazaris. "An attractive smile has become a sign of success."

There has even been a shift in what we perceive as "white". It's no longer a simple concept. The German-made Vita 3D-Master shade system, for example, comprises 29 shades as well as 52 intermediate shades. And shade guides, used by dentists to show patients how bleaching changes tooth colour, have been revised in the past five years to include lighter-than-natural hues.

Professor Laurence Walsh, the head of the school of dentistry at the University of Queensland, says natural shades are off-white with "traces of warm reds and yellows", and teeth yellow with age as a matter of course. "People are coming to dentists with teeth that 10 years ago were already considered to be white," says Lazaris. Now, they want whiter still.

The desire for pearly whites is not new. Ancient Egyptians bleached teeth with ground pumice and vinegar, while ancient Romans are said to have used human urine. American dentists began lightening teeth with hydrogen peroxide in the 1980s and the latter part of that decade saw the first take-home bleaching kits – custom-made trays, similar to mouthguards, were filled with carbamide peroxide (a hydrogen peroxide compound) and worn overnight.

But in Australia in 1992, when Lazaris started his practice, whitening teeth in surgeries was still →

"a rarity". Not any more – these days he performs about 10 a week.

Surgery-based whitening procedures, or laser whitening – which is bleaching with light in a dentist's surgery – cost \$800 to \$1200. The lips are pulled back to prevent burns while peroxide is applied to the teeth and activated by light, whitening up to eight shades in an hour.

Do-it-yourself kits sold over the counter are, of course, much cheaper. My local pharmacy, in Sydney's north, sells nine products including \$30 kits with a paint-on gel and bleaching tray; a mouthwash; and toothpastes priced from \$5 that promise to "give you whiter teeth in 14 days".

Porcelain veneers, which range from \$800 to \$2500 a tooth, are used primarily for reshaping or realigning teeth. This irreversible procedure involves bonding a shell onto the tooth and is usually used in cases of highly resistant stains.

Nowadays, white teeth are a must if you're in the spotlight. "High-profile people," Lazaris says, "don't want to be seen as less than perfect." If Sydney celebrity agent Max Markson meets an aspiring actor with "yellow, misshapen or missing teeth, I tell them straightaway to get them done," says Markson. "If someone's going to invest \$100,000 in having you do a TV commercial, you've got to look sensational."

Regular folks are feeling the pressure to look good, too. Whereas the movie industry has always been image conscious, Markson says "it's now permeating all of society. You want to look better." Today, "professional people are getting it done" – including Markson, who has been whitening his teeth for years.

"White teeth are the desirable ideal in terms of what we consider beautiful," says Kerrie McCallum, editor of *In Style* magazine. She believes celebrities have made whitening treatments "more acceptable", while also becoming more affordable. McCallum's dentist suggested she bleach her teeth after he saw her on a television segment. "It really did work," she says. "It was subtle; it wasn't glaringly white. It made my teeth look cleaner and was pain free."

Recruitment consultant Sarah Burn, 29, had her teeth whitened, too. Burn wanted to fix the gappy, uneven teeth she hid with her hand when she talked. She also wanted veneers and a dental implant – an artificial tooth embedded in her jaw with a titanium screw – to replace a damaged one. The dental work, completed last month, took 11 months and cost \$23,000. Initially embarrassed to tell friends about the procedures, she found their reactions were positive.

The process began with Burn bleaching her own teeth with a take-home kit, so they would match the whiter veneers. The implant was then inserted and a gum lift improved her "gummy smile". Finally, her "smile line" was prepared for temporary veneers and, a month later, permanent porcelain shells were cemented on.

Burn says the anaesthetic injections and removal of the temporary veneers left her teeth "sensitive and sore ... but if you took paracetamol, it would



Celebrities such as Jessica Simpson fuel the trend for whiter teeth.

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be OK". She says the short-term discomfort was minimal compared with having braces from the age of 11 to 18 – through two school formals – and she doesn't mind wearing a mouthguard every night to protect her veneers.

Although teeth whitening is gaining acceptance, one 48-year-old government policy officer was so concerned that his colleagues would think him vain he didn't want his name published. He has had eight crowns put on his teeth, which had been worn down by a third due to grinding, and he admits that while functionality was his goal, vanity had kicked in, too.

Rather than get yellow crowns to match his coffee- and nicotine-stained teeth, he opted for laser bleaching and whiter crowns. "Now you see 60- and 70-year-olds with teeth out of *Cleo* magazine," he says. "I didn't want the teeth of an 18-year-old" – so he chose a fresher "uncaffeinated" look in pale ivory.

Today, people often want what Australian Dental Association chief executive Robert Boyd-Boland calls "Kelvinators" – fridge-like flawlessly white teeth that they have seen in ads. "Nobody's teeth look that good; it's advertising," says Boyd-Boland. His concern is that white teeth aren't necessarily healthy teeth, and people still need to brush, floss and get dental check-ups.

What about side effects? Some patients have reported swollen lips from laser whitening, burned

gums and lips and excessive sensitivity. However, the University of Queensland's Laurence Walsh says the procedure is safe when supervised by a dentist – although some patients can experience sensitivity for a few days. Dentists also determine who should not undergo bleaching, such as those with gum disease or receding gums, and pregnant women are advised not to have any elective medical procedure. When whitening is done in a surgery, the soft lip and gum tissue are protected from the bleaching agent and the process is carefully managed.

At home, though, Walsh says people can "overdo it in an attempt to get more [of a result] or go faster" by wearing the bleaching trays for longer than the recommended times, leaving teeth opaque or temporarily sensitive. Gums can burn and then retract if the burn is not treated immediately.

Walsh says laser bleaching is occasionally done by beauticians who don't have the technical ability or equipment to meet safety and hygiene standards. (Some state dental boards are moving to ban this.)

He also points out that veneers, which seem quick and easy on *Extreme Makeover*, are a permanent change because "you have to shave enamel off the tooth surface and that's irreversible". Veneers can chip and crack and may need to be replaced in time. Decay can also appear around the edge of the veneer as gums recede with age.

Walsh says Australian dentists would discourage patients from having veneers solely for whitening purposes when a less invasive procedure, such as bleaching or using whitening toothpaste, could be effective. "Part of the normal consent process is to tell people the veneer could break or chip or it might have to be repaired," he says.

Not surprisingly, the wedding industry loves tooth whitening. Wedding planner Marisa Welcome, who owns Melbourne's A Lavish Affair, says about 50 per cent of her brides bleach. "It makes sense," says Nicholas Damilatis of Sovereign Weddings in Melbourne, who has noticed grooms going for it, too. "They've probably invested a lot [of money] in photography and they want to look their best."

Personal assistant Nadine De Carvalho, 30, from Melbourne's Doncaster, went whiter for her April wedding. "We see so much publicity about this or that superstar and you want that handbag, that look," she says. "Teeth are part of that." However, she says the \$800 she paid for laser bleaching "wasn't worth it" – she couldn't see much difference.

Claudia Steck, 17, bleached her teeth two years ago for her year 10 formal, prompted by her mum, Donna, a Sydney dental nurse. Unlike De Carvalho, Claudia "was impressed", saying her boyfriend still compliments her and wants it done himself.

Sydney cosmetic dentist Dr Michael Finkelstein says he has performed about 8000 bleachings in 10 years and, explaining its popularity, cites his own 16-year-old, who has naturally pearly-white, unbleached teeth. "I watch my daughter – who's got a wonderful smile – get away with murder," he says. "She can flash that smile and people just melt." ●