

# Cosmetic dentistry

Caring for your teeth

April 2023

Cosmetic Dentistry is becoming increasingly popular in Australia, amongst people of all ages. In recent years, the rise of social media has exposed us to a constant stream of 'perfect looking' smiles and, more worryingly, treatment advice from non-professionals and attractive marketing.

This article is intended to help you understand how to prepare for professional cosmetic dental treatment in a safe way for the best results and which online trends to avoid. If you have any concerns about the appearance of your teeth, make an appointment to see your dentist for a full check-up and find out what your options are.

## What is Cosmetic Dentistry?

Cosmetic Dentistry is a very broad term meaning any treatment that changes the way your teeth look. This may be a change in the shape, colour or position of your teeth. It also includes tooth replacement treatment, if you have any missing teeth. It may be something small, like fixing a small chip in a front tooth, or something more complex like straightening all your teeth.

## Before you start treatment

Think about what exactly you like or dislike about your teeth. Try to be specific – how would you like the shape, colour or position to be different?

Also consider the following:

- **Symptoms** – Do you have any discomfort or pain in your mouth?
- **Costs** – How much time and money are you prepared to invest? If you have private health insurance, you can contact your fund to check what you are covered for or look for other options.
- **Maintenance** – How much effort you would be prepared to put into looking after your teeth at home in the future? 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.
- **Previous treatments** – What was done and how did you feel about it?

## Taking the first step

It is important to see a dentist for a full check-up as your first step.

- Your health is the most important thing, so you should make sure there's no tooth decay or gum disease before starting cosmetic treatment. Professional teeth cleaning is also important. Ignoring existing disease may cause pain and infection in the future and will damage the cosmetic work.
- Find out the cause of your concern about the appearance of your teeth. For example, a discoloured tooth may have several different causes, which need different types of treatment.

When you book the appointment, let the dental clinic know briefly what you would like to discuss, so they allow enough time for you.



## At the dental appointment

Let your dentist know what your concerns are, using the list above as a starting point. You can also ask:

- What options are available – the pros and the cons?
- What results can be reasonably expected?
- Costs – time and money, and payment options
- Possible side effects or complications
- If any maintenance is needed afterwards.

It may be useful to write these down before your appointment to help you remember.

If it is a simple procedure, it may be done on the day. If it is complex, the dentist may need time to analyse your teeth before discussing a treatment plan with you. In some cases, you may be referred to specialist dentists for the best results.

## What are some common types of cosmetic treatment?

- **Whitening** - A bleaching gel is applied to your teeth, either at home using a thin mouthguard fitted to your teeth, or in the clinic. This whitens natural tooth structure but does not whiten fillings, dentures or crowns that you may already have.
- **Orthodontics** - Braces or thin clear plastic trays that fit over the teeth, to change the position of the teeth, often used for straightening.
- **Veneers** - A thin layer of filling or ceramic material glued onto the outer tooth surface, similar to the application of false fingernails. Some of your tooth surface may need to be polished off to create enough space for the material.
- **Crowns** - A ceramic or metal shell that covers your entire tooth. Removal of tooth structure is usually required to make space for a crown.
- **Implants** - A titanium screw placed in the jaw bone, onto which a ceramic tooth is attached, to replace a missing tooth.
- **Dentures** - A removable set of teeth to replace missing teeth.

It is important to note that some procedures are more invasive than others, or require more thorough ongoing maintenance care.

There is no single 'best treatment' because everybody has different needs and preferences. It is important to chat with your dentist about your concerns to work on a suitable plan together.

## A caution about do-it-yourself tricks you see online

In recent years, there have been a lot of viral videos where people have tried to do their own cosmetic dental work at home. There are dangers to following these trends without discussing with your dentist first – the damage can be drastic and irreversible.

- **Buying online whitening or orthodontic kits** without a full dental assessment first puts your health at risk. Tooth discolouration may be caused by decay, bacteria build-up or other dental conditions that whitening will not help. Ignoring these can create bigger problems later. Straightening teeth comes with challenges, such as making sure that your teeth can continue to bite together.
- **Using household products for tooth whitening** can irreversibly thin healthy tooth structure by either being too abrasive or acidic. This means the whiter, protective outer layer of the tooth (enamel) becomes thinner and the yellower and the sensitive inner layer of the tooth (dentine) becomes more prominent. Not only does this discolour the tooth over time, it can cause uncomfortable sensitivity.
- **Using superglue to repair teeth** can cause irritation to the gums, or stick to the lips. It can also cause an allergic reaction. Superglue is not designed to bond to tooth, so the repair will break again and may become a choking hazard.
- **Shaving teeth down with nail files** can expose the inner layer of the tooth, or the pulp (nerve) in severe cases. This can cause sensitivity or require a root canal treatment.
- **Closing gaps between front teeth with elastic bands** is dangerous because the elastic can slide under the gum. This causes the teeth to detach from the gums, becoming loose and falling out.

