

Keeping Your Pearly Whites Perfectly White: **How to Avoid Tooth Discoloration**

Causes and Prevention of Tooth Staining and Discoloration

There are many factors that contribute to tooth staining. It is important to understand what staining is in order to be able to prevent it. First, there are two types of tooth discoloration: extrinsic (external) which affects teeth from the outside and intrinsic (internal) which affects the teeth from the inside.

Extrinsic staining occurs when stain producing substances accumulate on an uneven surface of the enamel. Stain producing substances include food and beverages such as red wine and tea which contain high levels of tannin, any form of tobacco, some oral bacteria, and topical medications. Some mouthwashes and toothpastes contain chlorhexidine (0.12%) or Stannous fluoride which will discolor teeth over time. Watch out for these substances if your teeth are prone to staining. Of course, any of these factors can be intensified by the accumulation of plaque caused by insufficient oral hygiene. Sufficient saliva generation is also important for removing food debris from the surface of the tooth. Diminished saliva production can be caused by obstructions of the salivary glands, chemotherapy, radiation treatments and some medicines, which can lead to extrinsic staining.

Intrinsic staining can be caused by some dental filling materials or the condition of the tooth. If a tooth has been mostly filled with dental materials or the tooth itself has a condition, such as a root canal filling the tooth may have a different color.

Treatment for Tooth Staining

Extrinsic stains are normally brown, black or gray and can be removed by polishing. Intrinsic stains may be red or pink and cannot be removed by polishing. If only one tooth is discolored it is most likely stained intrinsically and can signify root canal disease.

Once the dentist determines the cause of staining, a treatment plan can be developed. There are several treatments that will fix or prevent future coloration:

- Modification of diet and habits such as smoking or consuming a lot of foods and drinks with high levels of tannin.
- Brushing twice daily with a toothpaste that does not contain stannous fluoride. Many types of toothpaste also include whitening agents.
- Most extrinsic stains can be removed by professional cleaning and polishing by the dentist or hygienist.
- Remaining stains can be removed by bleaching the teeth. There are two methods of bleaching that depend on the type of discoloration.
- Fillings and restorations that are stained need to be removed and replaced. The tooth can then be properly restored to avoid further discoloration. Where the restoration and adjacent teeth meet is still more susceptible to discoloration.

To find out more, consult Dr. Dautel or your hygienist at your next appointment.