

Teeth - cosmetic dentistry explained

Discoloured, chipped or missing teeth can affect self-confidence. A person who feels their teeth are unattractive may be reluctant to smile with parted lips or may resort to covering their mouth with their hand whenever they laugh. Chipped or missing teeth can also affect a person's oral health.

Cosmetic dentistry is the broad term for a range of dental procedures that can restore or replace discoloured, chipped, gapped, crooked or missing teeth. Severe tooth problems may need orthodontic treatment. This is a specialised branch of dentistry that corrects jaw and teeth misalignments with devices such as braces. See your dentist or oral health professional for further information and advice.

Tooth-coloured fillings

Silver fillings can be replaced with tooth-coloured ones. This is particularly effective if the fillings are visible when you smile. However, the decision to have fillings replaced for appearance should be balanced against potential structural and nerve damage to teeth that can occur with placement of fillings.

Bleaching

Dark teeth can be lightened with specially formulated bleach. The dentist makes plastic trays that mould to the shape of your teeth. Every night at home, you pour the bleaching solution into the trays and 'bite' on them to bathe the teeth. Usually, the teeth lighten significantly in around two weeks. However, this treatment won't work on fillings.

Bleaching should only be tried under the guidance of a dental professional who will be able to discuss factors such as the possibility of post-bleaching sensitivity with you. Teeth that are discoloured following root canal treatment can sometimes have their original colour returned by bleaching treatment inside the tooth. This can only be carried out by a dentist.

Micro-abrasion

Discoloured enamel can be gently ground away using an abrasive, acid-based paste. In severe cases, the enamel may be removed entirely and the tooth covered with appropriately coloured filling material. Such treatment can impact on the strength of the teeth, so it should only be conducted by a dentist or oral health professional.

Bonding

Chipped, gapped, discoloured or oddly shaped teeth can be treated with bonding. The dentist applies resin (plastic) fillings that match the colour of the teeth. However, the resin may need to be replaced occasionally.

Veneers

Instead of resin fillings, affected teeth can be fitted with porcelain veneers. A veneer is only around half a millimetre thick and is glued to the front of the tooth. To make sure the thickness of the tooth remains the same, the equivalent depth of enamel will need to be removed first. Porcelain veneers last longer than resin fillings, but can be damaged or chipped by habits such as fingernail chewing.

Crowns

Crowns are caps that are permanently bonded to a damaged tooth. They can be covered in a thin layer of tooth-coloured porcelain to mask the repair and match the look of existing teeth.

Dental implants

A missing tooth can be replaced with a dental implant rather than a partial denture (false teeth). A small titanium screw is fixed into the jaw and the crown or tooth is fitted. In time, the screw becomes fused with the bone of the jaw. Implants are successful in around 90 to 95 per cent of cases. Those that replace the front teeth in the lower jaw have a near perfect success rate.

Orthodontic treatment

Teeth that are overcrowded, overlapping, crooked or severely gapped may need more than cosmetic treatment. Orthodontics is a specialised branch of dentistry that treats these teeth and jaw problems. Techniques used include corrective devices, such as braces and plates, to help the teeth to properly align.

Where to get help

- Your dentist or oral health professional
- Your public oral health service
- Community dental clinic Tel. 1300 360 054,
- The Royal Dental Hospital Melbourne, general dental enquiries Tel. (03) 9341 1000 or 1800 833 039 (from rural Victoria) Monday to Friday, 8:30am to 5pm. For emergencies Tel. 1300 360 054 Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 9.15pm, weekends and public holidays 9am to 9.15pm.
- Australian Dental Association Tel. (03) 8825 4600

Things to remember

- Discoloured, chipped or missing teeth can affect self-confidence and may affect your oral health.
- Cosmetic dentistry can make substantial improvements to every kind of smile.
- There are techniques to deal with discoloured, chipped, gapped, crooked or missing teeth.
- In some cases, you may need to be referred to a specialist in orthodontics.
- Speak to your dentist or qualified oral health professional for information and advice.

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