

Do white teeth really mean healthy teeth?

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Get to the real tooth of the matter.

1 Is white my colour?

"White teeth don't necessarily mean healthy teeth," says Dr Hetal Turakhia, Director, Beyond Smiles Dental Care Centre, Mumbai. "Asians in any case have slightly yellower teeth than westerners because of the increased pigmentation (which is why we're darker as well)," says New Delhi-based dental surgeon, Dr Sujit Nagrath. "It's a myth that darker-skinned people have whiter teeth; the whiteness is only enhanced because of the skin colour contrast." What's important is the pinkness of your gums. (A bloody red doesn't count). Your teeth also yellow with age but that doesn't mean they're not healthy. On the contrary, ultra white teeth could be bad: "It can mean excessive fluorides or hypocalcified spots that denote calcium deficiency," says Dr Turakhia.

2 But bleaching's harmful, right?

Not at all. "It's actually healthy unless you're referring to the bleaching caused by the acid in colas, of course," says Dr Turakhia. "Some people use indigenous methods of rubbing salt on their teeth, which should be avoided. It acts as an abrasive, rubbing off protective enamel covering and exposing your nerves." Bleaching's a better option, and over-the-counter gels are easily available: Try Colgate's Simply White Clear Whitening Gel.

3 So, what should I look out for?

For starters, a colour beyond light yellow. Then concentrate on your gums. If your gums bleed when you brush, they require immediate attention," says Dr Turakhia. "Bad breath and ulcers also need to be watched out for. They are indicators of bacterial accumulation in your mouth. You need to clean your tongue with a scraper to get rid of bad breath-something most Indian men don't do."

4 How do I feed my teeth?

Load up on vitamin C. Oranges are an excellent source and you can even rub the rind on your gums. "Another tasty option is cheese," says Dr Nagrath. "It prevents discolouration and fights bad-breath causing bacteria." Chew a lot of elaichi, parsley or tulsi. They help generate saliva and dean out any bacteria accumulation. "You shouldn't chew gum for more than 30 minutes, says Dr Turakhia. "Once it's juiced out, it dries your mouth encouraging bacterial growth."

5 What else can I do?

Floss! "In Western countries, brushing is secondary to flossing, whereas it's almost unheard of here. Ask your dentist to teach you to do it properly, else you'll end up cutting your skin," says Dr Nagrath. Use non-alcoholic mouth rinsers as the alcohol content will dry out your mouth. "Men in particular need to be more careful about their teeth than women, as they use a lot of power to brush," says Dr Turakhia. "Don't wait for three months to change your toothbrush; change it the minute it starts fraying." Brush with a soft-medium brush and not for more than three minutes. Brushing at night is more important. In the morning, brush after eating breakfast, not before so you don't have residue stuck in your teeth for the rest of the day. It'll help you impress the pretty secretary if you don't have bits of egg hiding your real smile.