



BEAUTY

## STYLE INVESTIGATES THE ILLEGAL TEETH-WHITENING INDUSTRY

Katie Glass investigates the dark side of the white rush — and what to know before you book in for a treatment

Katie Glass



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I sit back nervously in the dentist's chair. "My teeth are pretty sensitive," I mutter. The cold gel hits my enamel and I gasp. Suddenly, I regret letting my narcissism get the better of me. Again.

The cliché about Brits is that we have terrible teeth. But the Hollywood smile once reserved for celebrities, now sparkles from every screen. The desire for a blinding smile has spawned a dazzling industry in teeth whitening, from at-home kits, trays, pens, serums and stick-on strips to celebrity Harley Street dentists charging thousands. The market research company Mintel values the UK cosmetic dentistry industry at £2bn, and another recent report found that, on average, British men and women spend 11% more a month on their teeth than their skincare. But in this white rush, many consumers are unaware that some of the treatments being offered are not merely dangerous, they are illegal.

Dentist Dr Richard Marques has seen the demand for whitening grow exponentially over the past few years. "It's the selfies," he says, flashing his own brilliant grin. "People have never looked at themselves or each other so much." Now they come in asking for celebrity smiles just as we ask hairdressers for cuts. "I had a patient who said, 'I want Ross from Friends,'" he says. Not all those trying teeth whiteners are bleachorexics, of course. Most want nothing more than a subtly brighter-looking version of the colour they have. "White teeth are associated with youth, vitality. People trust people with white teeth more," Marques says. However, he worries that the growing demand for teeth whitening is fuelling a market in unregulated treatments. In the UK, teeth whitening can be carried out legally only by a dental professional registered with the General Dental Council (GDC). There are two methods available. The first and most expensive is carried out in the clinic and involves a solution of hydrogen peroxide and either a laser or



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LED. Results are near-instantaneous and prices in London range from £600 to £1,000. The second requires specially moulded trays and a similar, albeit weaker, formula that can be dispensed and administered at home. The best results come after approximately two weeks, and prices start at about £300. The highest concentration of hydrogen peroxide solution a dentist can use in the UK is 6%, while at-home kits bought in British pharmacies are restricted to a maximum of 0.1%. Then there are whitening toothpastes, which Dr Uchenna Okoye, of the dental clinic London Smiling, says won't necessarily "whiten" teeth, but will remove stains, so they can only do so much.

At-home kits sold online, however, are not just a headache for trading standards, but can pose serious risks to the consumer. Many contain far higher percentages of hydrogen peroxide, while some try to circumvent the law by using damaging bleaching alternatives. They might also be fakes. Marques tells me of teeth-whitening products that turn out to contain household and domestic bleach. "They'll put in anything that is cheap," he says. One woman told me she had bought what claimed to be brand-name whitening strips online that arrived unpackaged and without instructions, in a makeshift envelope. When applied, they left her teeth sensitive and gums raw and red.

Getting your teeth whitened by someone else can prove equally risky. Any hairdresser or beautician performing or advising on teeth whitening is doing so illegally. In 2018, 30 prosecutions were brought for illegal teeth whitening and the courts are handing out increasingly severe fines for convictions. The Essex Smiles chain was ordered to pay fines and costs of £4,500 last year, having been found guilty of offering illegal teeth whitening. Karen Coates of the Oral Health Foundation says being treated by someone unqualified in dentistry raises a host of concerns: they will not understand the implications of a client's medical history, and they cannot access a client's oral health records to advise if treatment is even suitable — gum disease and other oral health problems can be made worse by teeth-whitening products. A salon is also unlikely to match the hygiene standards dentists observe, leading to a serious risk of infection.

Some beauticians have been found using formulas containing a far higher proportion of hydrogen peroxide than any dentist would use — an undercover investigation by the BBC found one woman whitening teeth with hydrogen peroxide at a level of 25%, more than four times the legal limit. Incorrectly using these chemicals can cause burns, blisters, swelling, agonising pain, permanent sensitivity and even tooth loss. Even the laser and LED whitening treatments offered by many beauticians involve some form of active gel being applied to teeth, and it is impossible to be sure what chemicals are being used, again risking extreme sensitivity and permanent damage to the tooth enamel. "This is not a cosmetic product like lipstick that can be wiped off," Coates says. "The tooth surface is porous, so anything placed onto it will penetrate the tooth."

Despite increasing awareness — and prosecutions — high-street teeth whitening is still surprisingly prevalent. On the beauty and wellness booking platform Treatwell, I found various salons offering treatments. I called one to book. On the phone, I asked if it would be a dentist doing the treatment. No, I was told, it would not. The woman on the phone went on to describe how they would put a shield with gel in my mouth and then put me under a laser for 20 minutes. As Coates says, even this process constitutes dentistry and it is illegal for anyone unregistered to do. It is worth noting that in America, where teeth whitening is even bigger business, whitening is seen as a cosmetic procedure, and treatments, formulas and kits do not have to be approved before being made available to the public.

Marques would like to see the British Dental Association and GDC do more to regulate teeth whitening, and Treatwell remove non-dentists who are offering these treatments from its site. At his shiny London practice, everything is sterile, with allergy medication, an oxygen tank and even a defibrillator ready for emergencies. He is insured for any issues. First he checks my teeth — not just to see if I am suitable for treatment, but also to identify crowns, veneers (not that I have any) and fillings, all of which cannot be lightened. Then he makes bespoke trays for my mouth before applying a "rigorously tested" Philips gel to the shield and sits me under an LED light. The treatment doesn't come cheap — £950 in my case.

Despite all this protection I still feel nervous, and the 20 minutes seems to last for ever. "Will it hurt?" I mouth through the shield. "Not if it's done properly," Marques says reassuringly. When I finally walk out, it is with a dazzling but natural-looking grin — five shades lighter. Mostly I am relieved to find my teeth looking and feeling as healthy as when I walked in.

## What to look out for

- Anyone who is not a registered dentist should not be whitening your teeth. Spas or salons offering the service are doing so illegally.
- Be sure to check the ingredients in at-home whitening kits. The percentage of hydrogen peroxide should be no higher than 0.1%.
- Not everyone needs teeth whitening. The general rule of thumb is that if your teeth are the same colour as the whites of your eyes, you're doing just fine without.

## Where to go

- Wimpole Street Dental [wimpolestreetdental.com](http://wimpolestreetdental.com)
- London Smiling Dental Group [londonsmiling.com](http://londonsmiling.com)
- Clifton Dental Studio, Bristol [cliftonsmiles.com](http://cliftonsmiles.com)
- Oxford Dental Centre [oxforddentalcare.net](http://oxforddentalcare.net)