

It's A Sensitive Subject!

Q: I wanted to bleach my teeth but I have been warned that it causes tooth sensitivity. My teeth are already sensitive. What can I do about that?

A: While it is true that tooth lightening often causes a bit of sensitivity it is usually temporary—during the process itself. When a tooth (or teeth) is sensitive it is a sign that the nerve chamber (called the pulp) is inflamed. Before lightening it would be best for you and your dentist to identify the cause of your existing sensitivity. Here are some more common causes:

- A cavity or a cracked filling, where saliva, air, or sweets excite the dentin (inner layer of tooth structure between the enamel and pulp chamber)
- Dentin exposure at the gum line caused from recession, often as a result of aggressive tooth brushing habits (called *cervical sensitivity*).
- A nighttime grinding habit (called *bruxism*), which causes excessive forces on several teeth during REM sleep.
- A crack in the tooth; often this sensitivity is stimulated by chewing in just the “right” spot.
- A dying or abscessed tooth, where a root canal (to fill in the pulp canal) is necessary. Often this causes heat sensitivity along with biting and cold sensitivity.

To help solve the mystery you might want to keep a log of your discomfort complete with frequency and location. Before lightening your dentist may advise:

- A filling for a cavity or a cracked tooth
- Fluoride treatments, MI paste or other “ointments” that can desensitize dentin exposure
- A bitesplint (also called a bite guard, or MAGO) can reduce or even eliminate night time bruxism
- A crown can help a cracked tooth not flex under pressure
- A root canal or extraction to remedy a dying tooth

It will be helpful to quell your sensitivity before lightening. Also, during the lightening process your dental office will likely want to see you frequently in order to alter the bleach concentration or frequency and/or to continue de-sensitizing treatments.