

# Brighten Up!

Teeth-whitening spas and services are springing up all over. *Andrea Dawn Clark* investigates the trend.



ANYONE STROLLING the streets of New York is likely to notice a new kind of beauty lure: the teeth-whitening spa. Last fall's International Spa Association (iSPA) conference exhibition hinted at the trend; one of the only

really "new" products on view was a teeth-whitening system positioned for spas. In what seems like a more reliable interpretation of the trend, new teeth-whitening spas run by dental franchises supplement their medically sanc-

tioned treatments with spalike services and a serene environment.

According to the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry, the demand for teeth-whitening treatments has grown by more than 300 percent in the past five years. This is due in part to the refinement of the procedure; what once took six weeks to achieve can now happen in an hour.

Smile spas make the after-work transformation from drab to dazzling possible by using bleaching products with high levels of hydrogen peroxide—concentrations range from 15 to 35 percent, whereas most over-the-counter products have about 3 percent hydrogen peroxide. In most instances, these whitening gels are activated with high-intensity lights or lasers that further accelerate the process.

Truth be told, you could go to a regular dentist office for this type of whitening treatment and most likely get the same results. What a smile spa offers that your average

dentist doesn't is a more relaxing environment, and a dentist and staff that specialize in the process. "I've done more than 7,000 whitening treatments," says Dr. Radford Goto, the center dentist at the BriteSmile spa in Manhattan. "There's nothing that my staff and I haven't seen in terms of whitening teeth."

An innovator in the category, BriteSmile opened its first smile spa in California in 1999, expanding to 14 properties nationwide. The decor is clean and bright in a mellow way—white orchids, gold-ened hardwood floors, leather-covered chrome chairs. But the most important aesthetic element is the pure white lighting, engineered to display the true color of your teeth.

There's a medical questionnaire followed by an exam with an evaluation of the degree of whiteness you can expect. "You're not committed to anything by having a consultation," says Goto. "A patient needs that time and information to gauge whether or not the results are worth it for them." If you choose to whiten, chances are you can get started right away.

The first step of the process is a pre-whitening brushing with

intervals in which the dentist removes the old gel and applies a fresh coat. Throughout the hour, the dentist or one of the staff checks in to adjust the placement of the light and make sure you're comfortable.

Though the experience isn't as blissful as a full-body massage, the results do help a lot of people feel better about themselves. On average, these high-tech teeth-whitening treatments can make your smile eight shades whiter, inspiring clients to smile a lot more *and* take better care of their teeth.

Teeth may be sensitive afterward, but that's somewhat rare. After the whitening process you're limited to non-staining, colorless foods like cottage cheese and white rice for 24 hours while the protective barrier on your teeth, called the "acquired pellicle," can fully redevelop. This surface layer is also removed during regular dental cleanings. The acquired pellicle naturally restores itself, but teeth are more vulnerable to stains without it.

Depending on your teeth and the spa, the procedure can cost anywhere from \$500 to \$1,000.

## Teeth whitening can inspire clients to take better care of their teeth.

slightly abrasive toothpaste, followed by a "before" photograph. Once teeth are isolated from gums and lips, the dentist applies a 15 percent hydrogen peroxide gel. A high-intensity plasma light that activates the gel is positioned over your mouth while you settle in to watch a small TV with headphones or take a little nap. The full course of the treatment is one hour, but it's split into three 20-minute

Typically, results last for two or more years with a regression of about one shade every six months. Whitening toothpastes and mouthwashes help extend it, too.

For almost anyone who wants instant teeth-whitening results, the smile spa may be the answer. Whether or not these businesses warrant the label of "spa" is debatable, but it's a commendable step to offer dental care in a civilized environment.

## Something to Smile About

Imagine going to the dentist and getting an aromatherapy foot massage and paraffin hand treatment while reclining in a chair with temperature and massage settings that you alone control. Sybaritic tooth spa services are becoming more common as dentists realize how these make patients feel blessed rather than stressed during and after daunting dental procedures. While Paul Tanners' Manhattan dentist office features massage therapy services, Debra Gray King at the Atlanta Center for Cosmetic Dentistry offers paraffin hand treatments, massage boots, and soothing eye wraps to patients.

"I love offering spa services because in dentistry it's hard to make people feel good," says Dr. Kent Smith of 21st Century Dental in Irving, Texas. "When our patients feel good, we feel good, too, so everyone's happier." Besides offering massage and paraffin hand treatments, "we dim the lights in the rooms, burn aromatherapy diffusers and candles, and play the patient's favorite music," explains Smith. While vanilla is by far the most requested scent, he also reports that "we are going to start offering more massage therapy to meet patient demand." What's more, dentists around the country are scrambling to deliver similar services in an attempt to draw in more patients. "I'm starting to get calls from colleagues asking how they can create spa environments in their offices," says Smith.

—Kylie Roderick