Does “Activated Charcoal” Effectively Whiten Teeth?

By Van B. Haywood, DMD, and Erin Boyleston, RDH, MS

Q One of my patients asked me about using activated charcoal to whiten teeth. While I had not heard of this before, upon a Google search, it seems to be a popular approach to at-home bleaching. How should I advise my patients on this trend?

A The answer to the question of whether activated charcoal can whiten teeth requires an understanding of the difference between the terms “whitening” and “bleaching,” as well as awareness of the current research and the position of the American Dental Association (ADA) on the use of “activated charcoal” to whiten teeth.

When the word “whitening” is used in most over-the-counter products, whitening means the product removes surface stains. It does not change the inherent color of the teeth; this is called “bleaching.” Bleaching also causes a whitening of the tooth, as it both removes the surface stains and changes the genetic color of the tooth, which is found in the dentin. Also, a colorimeter (which measures color) will read the tooth as “whiter,” whether the surface stain is removed, or the internal color of the tooth changes. As such, both bleaching products and whitening products create whiter teeth. At this time, a product that claims whitening can generally be assumed to remove surface stains, not change the color of the tooth or restoration.

According to ADA spokesperson Kimberly Harms, DDS, there isn’t awareness of the current research and the position of the American Dental Association (ADA) on the use of “activated charcoal” to whiten teeth. The answer to the question of whether activated charcoal can whiten teeth requires an understanding of the difference between the terms “whitening” and “bleaching,” as well as awareness of the current research and the position of the American Dental Association (ADA) on the use of “activated charcoal” to whiten teeth.

Activated charcoal does not change the color of the teeth other than by abrasive action like a toothpaste, and its use may pose some risk to the enamel and gingiva.³

REFERENCES

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VAN B. HAYWOOD, DMD, is a professor in the Department of Restorative Sciences, Dental College of Georgia at Augusta University in Augusta, Georgia. In 1989, he co-authored the first publication in the world on nightguard vital bleaching (at-home tray bleaching) with Harald Heymann, DDS, MEd, and, in 1997, he co-authored the first article on extended treatment (6 months) of tetracycline-stained teeth using this tray technique. Haywood has completed further research and more than 145 publications on the tray bleaching technique and the topic of bleaching and esthetics, including first papers on treating bleaching sensitivity with potassium nitrate, direct thermoplastic tray fabrication, bleaching primary teeth, and caries control with bleaching materials. Many of his articles are available at: vanhaywood.com.

ERIN BOYLESTON, RDH, MS, is an assistant professor in the Department of Dental Hygiene at Augusta University. She serves as clinic coordinator for both first-year and second-year dental hygiene students and is the course director for preclinical, patient care, and pharmacology.

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