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Ask the Expert: White Spots on Teeth

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Q: I have white speckles on my teeth. I'm worried if I whiten my teeth they will become brighter than the rest of my tooth. What are my options to correct this?

A: The issue at hand is probably a lack of calcium often referred to as the tooth being hypocalcified (hypo refers to too little). White spots can be caused by acidity from the bacteria in dental plaque (due to poor dental hygiene) and can occur if tooth brushing is not thorough around braces. Another cause may be ingestion of excessive amounts of fluoride when young (in the primary tooth stage). The result can be spotted adult teeth particularly common on the front teeth. Also, trauma to the developing tooth buds in infancy, such as from an illness, can also lead to "chalky white spots" in the enamel. Another cause may be a diet with acidic foods or drinks.

The following are the treatment options available. If the treatment is kept conservative, it may be helpful to try more than one procedure:

1. Enamel micro-abrasion: This involves a slurry of pumice and 18% hydrochloric acid used in a cup attached to a dental slow speed hand piece to polish the spotted enamel surface. This process removes a thin layer of enamel. Hence, it works well if the spotting is fairly superficial. However, if the spot(s) have not disappeared, it may work synergistically with tooth whitening. Price: \$150+.
2. Tooth bleaching with hydrogen peroxide: In my experience, tooth whitening lessens the intensity of the "chalky white spots" due to a lack of calcium in teeth, though rarely completely resolves them. There are other treatment options and resolution of this problem will depend severity of the decalcification. Take home and/or in-office options are available. Price: \$300+.
3. Tooth bonding: If there are a few spots in the enamel that are somewhat deep, then removing the spotted enamel and restoring the missing enamel with a composite resin will work well. Even if the spotting is significant, a "resin veneer" could be the treatment of choice also. The resin filling material can be used to create a thin shell over the decalcified area. Price: \$100+.
4. Porcelain veneer or crown: For more extensive deep chalky white spots, porcelain veneers and crowns will certainly resolve any white spot concerns. More extensive tooth preparation is needed, but the white spots will be covered completely. Price: \$1,000+ per tooth.



-Dr. Brian S. Friedman, DDS, <http://www.drbranfordman.ca>.

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