Confocal microscopy investigation of enamel subsurface structure following bleaching

Authors: Prof Daniel C. N. Chan, Prof William D. Browning, Prof Albert Kwok-Hung Chung & Prof So-Ran Kwon, USA & Korea

Leonard et al. evaluated casts made from impressions of teeth bleached with 10% carbamide peroxide for eight to ten hours per day for 14 days, and found no or minimal changes in the enamel surface. Their findings may be explained by the limits of the methodology, in which there was inadequate reproduction of the minor enamel alterations in the impression. Other in vitro SEM studies published recently have also revealed no enamel irregularities after bleaching.

In general, recent literature supports the theory that a high concentration of carbamide peroxide is detrimental to enamel surface integrity, while low concentrations were found to produce no changes. A clinical implication of these findings may be that the teeth are more susceptible to extrinsic discolouration after bleaching due to increased surface roughness.

The changes may be deeper than superficial. Using infrared spectroscopic analysis, Oltu and Gürgan reported that in vitro treatment of extracted teeth with 35% carbamide peroxide for 30 minutes per day for four days changed the inorganic composition of the enamel, whereas 10% and 16% concentrations did not. Cavalli et al. also demonstrated that bleached dentine could lose inorganic components, resulting in ultrastructural alterations.

Studies have demonstrated a dynamic process of demineralisation of human enamel intra-oraly. In these studies, the existence of subsurface enamel pores, which increase and decrease in size in relation to this de- and remineralisation process, has been demonstrated. Amorphous calcium phosphate (ACP) has been shown to shift the de-/remineralisation balance towards remineralisation, resulting in a decrease in size and/or number of pores. It has been theorised that bleaching creates subsurface

---

Table I: Bleaching agents used in the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bleaching agent</th>
<th>Main ingredient and concentration</th>
<th>Manufacturer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nite White Excel 3 with ACP</td>
<td>16% hydrogen peroxide (+ ACP)</td>
<td>Discus Dental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opalescence PF</td>
<td>10% carbamide peroxide (+ fluoride and potassium nitrate)</td>
<td>Ultradent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

Figs. 1a–f: Pre-op view of one of the incisors selected for the study (a). Flattened area (≈ 4 x 5 mm) created by serial polishing with sandpaper up to 1,200 grit (b). A piece of water-resistant tape is applied to one-half of the tooth and burnished (c). The edge of the tape is sealed by painting it with a transparent nail varnish (d). Bleaching gel is applied to the exposed area (e). Diagrammatic representation of the control and treated areas (f).
pores and that this is a cause of the transient sensitivity experienced by some people when they whiten their teeth.

Recently, some companies have added ACP to their formulations. Claims have been made that the addition of ACP reduces tooth sensitivity by decreasing the size of these pores.16 In addition, by filling minor defects within the enamel, the addition of ACP creates an enamel surface that is smoother and more lustrous. However, in an in vitro study on bovine incisors, no supporting influence of fluoride-containing bleaching gels on remineralisation was observed.17

The purpose of this study was to evaluate enamel subsurface structure following application of two bleaching agents to extracted incisor teeth using confocal microscopy.

**Materials and method**

A flattened area (≈4 x 5 mm) was created on the labial surface of extracted central and lateral incisor teeth (n = 10) by serial polishing with SiC sandpaper of up to 1,200 grit (Figs. 1a & b). It is true that confocal microscopy holds greater advantages for samples that cannot be polished to a flat surface. In our case, the flattened surface helped in orienting the area of interest as a plane-parallel object held perpendicular to the optic axis for sharper image.

The teeth were ultrasonically cleaned with distilled water to remove debris. A piece of water-resistant tape was applied to one-half of the tooth and burnished (Fig. 1c). The edge of the tape was sealed by painting it with a transparent nail varnish (Fig. 1d). The exposed area was randomly assigned to one of two groups. The first group (ACP group) was treated with Nite White Excel 3 with ACP (Discus Dental). The second group (OP group) was treated with Opalescence PF 10 % (Ultradent). The untreated control for both groups was the area underneath the tape, allowing each tooth to serve as internal control. The composition of the whitening products is described in Table I.

Bleaching agents for both groups were applied for seven hours per day for 14 days. The materials were applied with a micro-brush, taking care to limit the application to the appropriate area only (Fig. 1e). Once the application of bleaching agent had been completed, the teeth were placed inside a plastic box, which acted as a moisture barrier, while keeping the bleaching agent undisturbed throughout the procedure.

After each daily application, expended bleaching material was first removed with a clean micro-brush. The area was then cleansed with water and blotted dry. Finally, the teeth were rinsed with air-water spray for 20 seconds. A cycling treatment methodology was employed. While not being actively treated, the teeth were stored in artificial saliva (Saliva Substitute, Roxane Laboratories). Up to the point of the microscopic examination, the tape covering the control group area remained in place (Fig. 1f).

Before confocal microscopic evaluation, the teeth were submerged in Texas Red dye with Dextran for 24 hours. A two-photon microscope (LSM 510 Meta, Carl Zeiss) was used to detect the fluorescence under an Argon 488 laser (Fig. 2a). Each area was examined up to a depth of 100 µm. The flattened enamel surface was orientated perpendicular to the laser beam with sticky wax and the whole tooth sample was placed under water contained in a Petri dish (Fig. 2b). Samples were viewed with a SX/0.16 objective, focusing approximately 5 to 100 µm below the surface. Images were relayed to a computer monitor for viewing. Additional images were made...
Iwamoto et al. showed similar negative results when silver nitrate was used as the staining agent. In that study, no penetration was seen in the enamel of any of the groups. However, we did see penetration of the dye in the periphery of the enamel prism in both the control and the treatment groups for both whitening materials. The increased uptake may be due to the removal of the organic components from the superficial enamel layers by the bleaching agent. The uptake of dyes in the control groups was not expected. This may be explained by the fact that exposed enamel is under constant attack in the oral environment. The weakened pores may be the inroad for chromopores and peroxide alike.

The penetration of the dyes was especially noticeable when we followed surface cracks to a depth of 100 µm (Fig. 4a). The uptake of dyes through the cracks may be clinically significant, since it may explain why certain patients are especially sensitive to bleaching. If diffusion through the enamel intercrystalline spaces is the sole cause of sensitivity, one would expect to find higher incidence of severe sensitivity. However, if subclinical defects/cracks are the cause, the clinical picture of severe sensitivity reported to be around 4% can be better explained. Enamel cracks or lamellae have been suggested to be initiation sites for caries.

As seen in Figure 4b, the periphery of the enamel prism shows increased uptake of the marker, indicating a possible route for the oxidation product to diffuse through the enamel surface. Based on our findings, we hypothesise that peroxide initially penetrated into and through the enamel intercrystalline spaces to reach the enamel dentine junction and dentine regions. Indeed, in vitro experiments by a number of authors have demonstrated the penetration of low levels of peroxide, from a range of peroxide products and solutions, into the pulp chambers of extracted teeth after exposure times of 15 to 30 minutes. One would expect that diffusion of peroxide through...
the intercrystalline spaces would be easier for peroxide, since the Dextran dye we used in our study has a high molecular weight of 3,000 to 70,000, while that of a hydroxyl radical is 17.

Our study did not find any evidence to support the claim that the addition of ACP reduces tooth sensitivity by decreasing the size of the pores. Another study looking at the simultaneous application of admixture solutions containing citric acid and sodium fluoride did find formation of CaF₂ globules deposited on the enamel surface. However, the CaF₂ globules deposited on the enamel surface appeared to be unable to prevent the alteration of the apatite structure during further exposure to acidic agents. No evidence of fluoride-induced recovery of the modified apatite structure was found. As for whether ACP can repair the pores simultaneously, previous studies of the repair of etched enamel reported that partial recovery from such damage takes several months in vivo.24 It is unlikely that our study duration of 14 days could have offered noticeable repair.

Hypothetically, ACP could reduce the effect of sensitivity if the pore sizes were reduced. However, such reduction would also prevent efficient diffusion of hydroxyl radicals to effect bleaching. Instead, ACP could work via different mechanisms, for example by influencing the type of anion or radicals formed. Hydrogen peroxide can form a number of different active oxygen species, depending on reaction conditions, including temperature, pH, light and presence of transition metals. Whether one type of anion or radical is less prone to causing sensitivity deserves further study.

It has also been suggested that ACP may have the ability to directly depolarise nerve endings.25 Additionally, in the generation of ACP by combining calcium nitrate and potassium phosphate, 0.25 % of potassium nitrate is generated.26 A recent study on traditional low sensitivity whiteners raised the question of whether the low level of potassium nitrate generated as a by-product was, in fact, clinically relevant.27

Clinical studies have shown that ACP was effective in reducing sensitivity.16,25 However, a recent in vivo study of 9 % H₂O₂ whitening strips with fifty subjects indicated that daily use of a Casein phosphopeptide-amorphous calcium phosphate paste in conjunction with tooth whitening has a minimal effect on tooth sensitivity compared with a placebo paste. Our study result raised the question of whether ACP might exert its desensitising effect through a mechanism other than decreasing the size of subsurface pores.

It is recognised that our study was limited by its small sample size and we only evaluated the enamel substrate. Severe sensitivity can be initiated through exposed dentine substrate. Another criticism may stem from the argument that cracks, which were shown in this study, may have been induced by extraction forces. Further studies need to be performed to explain the mechanism of ACP desensitisation better.

**Conclusion**

Uptake of dye through enamel intercrystalline spaces exists in both control and bleached enamel surfaces. Whitening products with and without ACP did not appear to decrease the size of these spaces. Subclinical enamel defects/cracks may be the cause of severe bleaching sensitivity.

**Acknowledgement**

We would like to thank Dr Katsuya Miyake and Mr Darren Baker, Cell Imaging Core Laboratory at Georgia Health Sciences University, for their help with the confocal microscopy. This project was funded by a grant from Ultradent.

**Editorial note:** A complete list of references is available from the publisher.

**Contact**

Dr Daniel C. N. Chan  
University of Washington  
School of Dentistry  
Office of Clinical Services  
Health Sciences Center, D322  
P.O. Box 356365  
Seattle, WA 98195, USA  
dcnchan@u.washington.edu