No longer a sensitive subject

Eric Peterson discusses sensitivity and whitening

The popular accessory nowadays is not just the handbag, the shoes, or the Chihuahua; it’s the pearly white smile to boost appearance and self-esteem. In fact, tooth whitening is one of the fastest growing sectors in the dental market, boasting an estimated value of £660 million according to the Academy of General Dentistry.

This growth has allowed teeth whitening to become more accessible for patients and there’s a solution to suit all budgets; in-office procedures, dentist-prescribed at-home treatments, strips and gels. But a common factor of this cosmetic procedure is that the patient will almost certainly experience some level of discomfort through sensitivity. This pain can often be so excruciating that the patient either stops treatment halfway through or dismisses this procedure altogether in search for a less painful option.

And it’s not just after teeth whitening, dentine hypersensitivity affects one third of the adult population at some point in their lives. This can be anything from a mild twinge to having severe discomfort that lasts for several hours or even days. Be it a result of teeth whitening or if they are simply sensitive to heat, cold, sweetness, acidity or brushing, by educating patients on how to deal with dentine hypersensitivity you can help them achieve a whiter, brighter, “pain-free” smile.

Explaining the causes and symptoms of sensitive teeth

Many people can be confused about the causes of their sensitive teeth so it’s important to make them aware of all the common factors and put them at ease. Generally, when the hard enamel is worn down or gums recede the dentine tubules become exposed; the causes and symptoms will differ for every patient, from eating or drinking foods and hot or cold beverages to touching teeth or exposing them to cold air.

The pain associated with dentine hypersensitivity can even affect the eating, drinking, and breathing habits of patients, so it’s ideal to start by informing them that sensitive teeth are relatively common and not usually a health concern.

• Check which toothpaste they use – Highly abrasive ingredients found in toothpastes can add to the discomfort, as they continue to wear away the enamel. Patients should steer clear of highly abrasive toothpastes, especially after in-surgery treatment, as they can damage the teeth and gums, removing the lustre of the teeth and dulling an otherwise beautiful smile.

Using tartar-control toothpastes can cause teeth to become sensitive and should be avoided. There are many types of toothpaste available on the market specifically formulated...
to minimise the effects of sensitivity, easing the pain and protecting sensitive teeth by sealing exposed, open dentine tubules.

- Check the patient’s five senses – A study which appeared in the General Dentistry journal (2002) confirmed that people who are sensitive to bright lights, loud noises, pungent perfumes and itchy clothing, are most likely to avoid hot and cold foods and drinks because they have sensitive teeth. The study found a direct relationship between sensitive teeth and other sensitivities, finding that patients with sensitive teeth expressed a need to wear sunglasses when outdoors.

Helping patients overcome sensitive teeth
As a dental professional your expert advice and recommendation carries considerable weight. Openly discussing sensitive teeth with patients will enable you to identify how much of a concern it is for them and recommend a solution to help eliminate the discomfort. Put their mind at rest by confirming that sensitive teeth can be easily addressed by following some simple oral care procedures; avoid brushing teeth too hard or too much, avoid grinding or clenching teeth and avoid acidic foods and drinks.

Patients should also be advised to use a low abrasion, desensitising, whitening toothpaste which contains the ingredient Potassium Citrate. This desensitising agent will help relieve tooth sensitivity by effectively blocking the transmission of pain sensation between the nerve cells rapidly and effectively, so that tooth whitening is no longer a sensitive subject! Ultimately, by switching to a low-abrasive whitening toothpaste patients can reduce the risk of suffering from dentine hypersensitivity from the outset.

In a study recently performed by Missouri Analytical Laboratories (July 2011), a range of whitening toothpastes were tested to compare and evaluate their levels of abrasion. The results confirmed that Beverly Hills Formula whitening toothpaste is proven to be less abrasive than other leading brands of both whitening and regular toothpastes, scoring as low as 95 on the RDA table whilst some leading competitors have levels as high as 147.

Raising awareness of sensitive teeth
By helping your patient’s combat sensitive teeth you will be making a dramatic improvement to their life, enabling them to enjoy hot and cold foods and drinks again.

Nominate a “sensitive teeth” expert in the practice or hold a “sensitive teeth” day/week/month; you’ll be surprised at how many patients will come forward to end their fight against sensitive teeth. Leave flyers/brochures on sensitive teeth around the practice, in reception or in the waiting room, and patients will feel more inclined to tackle the subject.

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About the author
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