Teeth whitening is a great way to improve your smile. Teeth whitening is generally not covered by your dental plan, but still a popular option for many.

At-home whitening:
Whitening toothpaste, rinses, strips and gels are all easy tools to find and use. These products have a lower strength of the whitening agent (usually hydrogen or carbamide peroxide) and may only whiten a shade or two lighter than your current tooth color. How well it whitens varies. Once the maximum shade is reached, it typically last up to four months.

In-office whitening:
The dental office offers a couple of choices for teeth whitening that are much more effective than at-home whitening. These are more costly than those you can get over the counter, but work more quickly to whiten several shades.

1. Take-home trays — Similar to mouth guards, trays fit over your teeth. The tray is filled with a peroxide-based product. The tray is worn daily for a couple of hours or overnight. It may take four weeks or more to get the shade you hope to reach.

2. In-office bleaching — The most effective and expensive option is bleaching. The bleaching product, which contains the most peroxide (15%-40%), is put on the teeth. Heat from a special light is used to speed up the whitening process. Results are usually seen after the first appointment. More than one appointment may be needed to achieve more vivid results.

In all cases, the peroxide-based material used to whiten teeth can result in sensitivity to hot and cold, and even changes in the gum tissue.

Start by taking good care of your teeth
No matter what whitening method is used, starting with good oral health is important. Cavities, gum disease, and other oral health issues should be addressed. A dentist can tell you why your teeth are discolored.

Keeping that bright, white smile also means regular dental visits, daily flossing and brushing and being willing to repeat the process of whitening once the white begins to fade.
Other cosmetic procedures to improve the look of your smile.

- **Crowns**: Crowns cover the walls of a tooth. When a tooth is weakened, the inside of the tooth may be replaced or filled and then a crown is placed over the tooth to strengthen it.

- **Veneers**: Veneers are thin coverings applied to the front of the tooth. Some of the surface of the natural tooth is removed. This allows the veneer to look more natural. The down side is that, like a crown, once a veneer is placed it cannot be removed. The veneer can be stained by certain foods and tobacco use and may not be reversed using whitening products.

- **Bonding**: Bonding fuses the tooth’s enamel and dentin together using porcelain or resin. This makes the tooth more stable and offers a nice look too. It is not as durable as a crown or veneer but can be more easily replaced.

**What should I do next?**

Talk to your dentist about the best method to improve your smile and the costs involved. Dental plans generally do not cover teeth whitening or other cosmetic procedures. Check your plan documents or call Customer Care to confirm your benefits.

For tips on taking care of your teeth, check out the videos on uhctv.comSM — uhctv.com > experts > dental focus.