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## WOMEN'S HEALTH

# HEALTH AND BEAUTY; In the Golden Age of Teeth, a Smile Can Be Perfected

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DENTISTS call them Hollywood Chiclets -- oversize, pearly white teeth that gleam so beautifully on the silver screen. Fifteen years ago, those celluloid teeth were most likely caps made of porcelain and gold, concealing filed-down tooth stumps, installed at a cost of thousands of dollars and many painful hours.

They still make for an expensive mouthful, but everything else about pearly whites has become easier.

And not a moment too soon -- at least for dentists, whose workload might otherwise be declining. For, by most accounts, America is in the golden age of teeth. Fifty years ago, 1 out of 3 Americans had no teeth. Now that is 1 in 10 and falling. The rate of tooth decay has dropped by 50 percent, because of fluoridated water and better dental technology.

Visits to the dentist, once uniformly feared, are much less terrifying and painful. But how will dentists flourish if teeth are so much healthier? The answer: a supersmile in every mouth.

By some estimates, 9 out of 10 dentists do at least basic cosmetic work, and a growing number of specialists are casting themselves as the tooth equivalents of plastic surgeons.

No firm figures exist, but Dr. Jeff Morley, a San Francisco dentist and a co-founder of the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry, said that from his talks with practitioners around the country, he would estimate that the number has nearly doubled every year for the last few years.

The change began with a technological breakthrough in the mid-1980's, the porcelain veneer. Before, the only way to manufacture square, white teeth was to file away the tooth and cover the stump with a cap of porcelain and metal. The time, pain and expense were usually endured only by movie stars and the rich and vain.

Porcelain veneers are much simpler, if not a lot cheaper, especially considering that, in general, neither they nor caps are covered by insurance.

The tooth is roughened with a laser so that the veneer can bond to it; then porcelain is molded and attached to the tooth. Metal is rarely used. Each tooth runs about \$2,000, but the procedure, depending on how many teeth are done, lasts only a few hours.

Dr. Larry Rosenthal, of the Rosenthal Group for Aesthetic Dentistry in Manhattan, described the procedure as "like bonding a baby's fingernail to each tooth."

The perfect smile can cost from \$750, for bleaching, to \$20,000 for the works, including porcelain veneers and straightening.

Joan Spain, 55, a retired bookkeeper in Philadelphia, conceded that her reasons for redoing her smile "were purely frivolous."

"I had porcelain veneers put on 10 top teeth and 6 on the bottom," Ms. Spain said. "It took two visits, six hours. I had no pain and walked out happy."

Dr. Rosenthal, her dentist, is convinced that better teeth lead to a better smile. Veneers on the front top teeth can push the lips out, making

them appear fuller, much as a collagen injection does, he said. Ms. Spain said that although her lips are naturally full, one side of her upper lip was thinning faster than the other because of age, and the veneers compensated.

Ms. Spain has a checkup once a year, and this year is bringing a friend. "She has thin lips, and I'm betting she'll get work done," Ms. Spain said.

Dr. Wynn Okuda of Honolulu, a prominent cosmetic dentist, sees himself as an artist who works through the medium of teeth.

"I used to be a general practitioner dentist, a long time ago," Dr. Okuda said. "What really triggered me to change my practice is that I have a real love of art, and cosmetic dentistry connects art and dentistry."

Before she saw Dr. Okuda, Carol Duarte, 55, a retired store manager living in Kauai, Hawaii, thought she was ready for false teeth. "I was living on aspirin, I couldn't chew my food, and I thought there was no hope for me," she said.

HER sister persuaded her to see Dr. Okuda, and every few weeks for two years Ms. Duarte commuted by plane to the big island of Hawaii, where she spent eight hours in the dental chair, having extensive work done, including tooth implants, bridgework and a root canal, as well as veneers.

"Now all my front teeth have porcelain veneers," she said.

Ms. Duarte added that more than her mouth changed as a result: she made improvements in her diet and exercise habits as well, at Dr. Okuda's suggestion.

"I felt that he had spent two years on my teeth," she said, "and I had to commit to maintenance, so I quit eating so much sugar and now I walk eight miles a day."

Cosmetic dentistry is not a regulated specialty. To perform cosmetic work, dentists need only order materials and read a few journals. But two professional groups, the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentists in Madison, Wisc., and the American Academy of Esthetic Dentistry in Naperville, Ill., require certification and training to join; both provide referrals.

Specialists in the field, of course, are quick to describe problems caused by under-qualified practitioners -- most commonly, unrealistically white teeth. A more serious drawback is that improperly applied veneers that are not adjusted to the patient's natural bite can chip and crack after a few years.

And it is important, Dr. Morley said, that the dentist, however specialized, "not overlook basic health principles" or less visible factors, like engineering the bite.

But the biggest hazard, cosmetic dentists assert, is that the patient does not get what he or she considers the most artistic result.

Dr. Morley contends that a good cosmetic dentist can make a smile look more feminine or masculine. "For a more aggressive smile," he said, "the canines are the key." They have the most personality of all the teeth, he said. Making them longer and more pointed gives a smile an animalistic leer, perfect, perhaps, for a hungry executive on the rise.

The lateral incisors, which are on each side of the two front teeth, are the key to femininity. Making them slightly smaller and rounder softens a smile. Making the two front teeth more square gives a masculine cast. Eliminating cracks, chips and dinginess in front makes a mouth look younger.

To convince patients that the "after" will be a dramatic change from the "before," a growing number of dentists use computer simulations. Dr. Rosenthal, who has redone the smiles of Kathie Lee Gifford and the model Bridget Hall, likes to show a patient a split-screen display. While he describes the possibility, a technician sitting beside the patient manipulates the computer version of the patient's teeth to make the contrast clear, he said.

Of course, some people come in with a picture in mind. Dr. Hans Malmstrom, the director of general dentistry for the Eastman Dental Center at the University of Rochester, credits cultural influences, like the universally perfect teeth of movie stars and models. "You have people coming in now and asking about things like bleaching and veneers in a way you didn't see five years ago," Dr. Malmstrom said.

But not all patients want to be told that their smiles, though healthy, could be perfect for a price. One woman, who asked not to be named, was shocked when her dentist brought up cosmetic procedures.

"I have very good teeth, very even, and he started talking about how the teeth had uneven transparencies, and he could put a veneer on them," she said. "I was offended and insulted, and I switched dentists."

That reaction is all too common, said Suzanne Boswell of Dallas, a consultant for doctors and dentists. Ms. Boswell visits their offices incognito, and reports back to them on how she was treated.

"Dentists live in a tiny, tiny world," she said. "They work in a little room, on little mouths, on little teeth."

And people who go to a cosmetic surgeon know why they're going there; most visits to a dentist are for more mundane reasons.

"Many people, especially baby boomers, have accepted how they look," Ms. Boswell said. "They don't want to sit in a dentist's chair and hear, 'we can take care of that space,' if they didn't bring it up.' And most of the time an insulted patient won't confront their dentist, but will simply find another."

Photos: Carol Duarte says she adopted a healthier life style after her teeth were redone. This 55-year-old woman received porcelain crowns and porcelain veneers. (Dr. Wynn Okuda)

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