SYMPTOM

Tooth - abnormal colors

A tooth or several teeth appear unusually yellow, brown, gray, black, or white

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
A tooth looks yellow, brown, gray, black, or chalky white

WHERE IT IS FELT
One tooth, several teeth, or the whole smile

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Surface stains, plaque or tartar, natural aging

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Facial swelling, fever, or trouble swallowing with color change

USUALLY LASTS
Until staining or its underlying cause is addressed

SEE A DOCTOR IF
New, persistent, painful, or single-tooth color change

Overview

Teeth naturally range from off-white to pale yellow or gray. Their color may also become darker with age. An abnormal color means that one tooth, several teeth, or parts of a tooth look different from their usual appearance.

Discoloration may be on the outside of the tooth or within its deeper layers. Surface stains often come from food, drinks, tobacco, plaque, or hardened plaque called tartar. Color changes inside a tooth can develop during tooth formation or after injury, decay, or damage to the tooth's inner tissue.

Color alone cannot show the cause. A dentist can check whether the change is harmless staining or a sign that the tooth needs treatment.

What it may feel or look like

Abnormal tooth color may appear as:

Discoloration often causes no physical feeling. Depending on the cause, you may also notice sensitivity to hot, cold, or sweet foods; pain when biting; a rough surface; bad breath; bleeding

gums; or a hole in the tooth.

A white or brown mark does not always mean tooth decay. Likewise, a dark tooth is not always infected. The pattern, symptoms, and dental history help identify what is happening.

- Yellow, brown, or black surface staining
- White, cream, or brown spots
- A gray, pink, or dark single tooth
- Dark lines or marks near the gums
- An overall change affecting many teeth
- A dark area around a filling, crown, or other dental work

Common causes

Surface stains are among the most common causes. Coffee, tea, red wine, strongly colored foods, and tobacco can leave pigments on the enamel, which is the hard outer layer of a tooth. Staining may collect more easily around crowded teeth or areas that are difficult to clean.

Plaque and tartar can make teeth look yellow or brown. Plaque is a sticky film of bacteria. If it is not removed, it can harden into tartar, which cannot be brushed away at home.

Natural aging may make teeth look more yellow. Enamel gradually becomes thinner, allowing more of the yellowish layer beneath it, called dentine, to show through.

Early or established tooth decay can cause chalky white, brown, or black areas. Decay may also cause sensitivity, pain, or a visible cavity, but it can be painless at first.

Less common causes include changes that happened while the teeth were developing. Too much fluoride during early childhood can produce faint white lines or, less often, darker or pitted areas. Certain medicines, including tetracycline antibiotics taken while teeth were forming, can cause deeper gray or brown discoloration.

An injured tooth may turn pink, gray, or dark because of bleeding or damage inside it. This can happen soon after an injury or months to years later. Previous root canal treatment, aging fillings, and some dental materials can also change a tooth's appearance.

Rarely, medical conditions affecting enamel or dentine formation cause unusual colors in many teeth. These usually begin during childhood and may run in families.

When to seek medical care

Book a dental appointment if the change is new, does not brush away, affects one tooth, or comes with pain or sensitivity. White, brown, or black spots should also be checked, especially if they are growing or the tooth surface feels rough.

Contact a dentist promptly after a blow to the mouth, even if the tooth is not painful. A tooth that later becomes gray or dark may need assessment of the tissue inside it.

Seek same-day dental or medical care if discoloration occurs with worsening toothache, fever, pus, a bad taste, or swelling of the gum, face, or jaw. These symptoms can occur with a dental infection.

Go to emergency care now if swelling makes it difficult to breathe or swallow, spreads toward the eye or neck, or causes significant difficulty opening the mouth. A permanent tooth that has been knocked out also needs immediate dental help. Hold it by the crown rather than the root, and do not scrub it.

Discoloration without pain, swelling, fever, or recent injury is usually suitable for a routine dental appointment.

How the cause is found

A dentist will ask when the color change began, whether it affects one or many teeth, and whether you have pain or sensitivity. Mention recent injuries, dental treatment, tobacco use, regular drinks that may stain, and medicines taken while the affected teeth were developing.

The dentist will examine the tooth surfaces, gums, fillings, and bite. They may check whether a mark can be cleaned or polished away. A light, tapping test, cold test, or small electrical test may help show whether the inner tooth tissue is responding normally.

Dental X-rays may be recommended if there could be decay, an infection, an old injury, or a problem beneath a filling. Not every color change requires an X-ray.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on whether the color is on the surface, within the tooth, or related to damage.

Professional cleaning can remove plaque, tartar, and some surface stains. Tooth decay may require fluoride treatment, a filling, or other dental care, depending on its depth. A damaged or infected inner tooth may need root canal treatment. Crowns, veneers, bonding, or internal bleaching may sometimes improve the appearance of deeper discoloration.

Brush gently twice a day with fluoride toothpaste and clean between your teeth daily. Reducing tobacco and frequently consumed staining drinks may limit new stains. Rinsing with water after coffee or tea can also help.

Whitening products do not treat decay, infection, or tartar. They may cause temporary tooth sensitivity or gum irritation, and they do not change the color of fillings, crowns, or veneers. Ask a dentist to assess unexplained discoloration before whitening.

Avoid applying household bleach, acids, abrasive powders, or undiluted peroxide to your teeth. These can injure the gums or wear away enamel. Charcoal and aggressive scrubbing may also damage tooth surfaces without addressing the cause.

What to expect

Surface stains may improve after professional cleaning and changes in daily habits, although they can return. Natural age-related color changes usually remain unless you choose cosmetic treatment.

Marks formed inside a tooth generally do not brush away. Their treatment and long-term appearance depend on the cause. Dental restorations may also need replacement over time if their color no longer matches surrounding teeth.

A tooth changed by injury may remain stable, recover, or develop problems later. Follow-up allows a dentist to monitor its color, symptoms, and response to testing. Untreated decay or infection can progress even when discomfort is mild, so persistent changes are worth checking.

Common questions

Are yellow teeth unhealthy?

Not necessarily. Healthy teeth are not always bright white, and dentine naturally gives teeth a yellowish tone. A dental examination can distinguish natural color from plaque, tartar, or decay.

Why has only one tooth turned gray?

A single gray tooth can follow an old injury or changes in the tissue inside the tooth. It may not hurt. A dentist should assess it rather than relying on color alone.

Do white spots mean too much fluoride?

Sometimes, but white spots can also come from early mineral loss, enamel development differences, or changes around braces. Their location and surface appearance help identify the

cause.

Will whitening remove every discoloration?

No. Whitening works better for some yellow or surface-related changes than for deep gray discoloration. It also does not whiten fillings, crowns, veneers, or tartar.

Can a child's discolored tooth be watched at home?

Minor staining can be discussed at a routine visit. Arrange an earlier dental assessment if one tooth becomes gray after an injury, or if there is pain, swelling, fever, looseness, or a visible cavity.

Sources

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