

# Dental Veneers: Thin Is In

**S**mile makeovers have become very popular, as a person's smile will always make a first and lasting impression. The appearance of one's smile not only affects self-esteem and self-perception, but it also may have an impact on personal and professional success and happiness. Smile makeovers with dental veneers are a great way to improve the appearance of your smile.

## Dental veneers demystified

Dental veneers are wafer-thin, custom-made dental restorations that cover the front surfaces of teeth. They are a very conservative restoration, as they require only slight preparation of tooth structure. Most often veneers are made of a translucent porcelain, which has optical and reflective properties similar to teeth. This gives the porcelain veneer a highly natural look.

Tooth structure that is damaged, worn, or chipped can be effectively repaired with dental veneers. The porcelain has coloration, which can also make veneers effective at covering up tooth discoloration. Discoloration can come from medication taken as a child (such as the antibiotic tetracycline), staining, or old, unsightly restorations. Veneers can also be made to correct crowded and misaligned teeth or teeth with spaces between them.

## Are veneers right for you?

Prior to any cosmetic dentistry, which includes dental veneers, the teeth and supporting gum and bone must be healthy. Your cosmetic dentist will do a thorough examination of your teeth, gum tissue, and "bite," as well as take dental X-rays to fully diagnose the health of your mouth. There may be times when the tooth has suffered from too much damage or is so weakened that other cosmetic procedures are indicated. Crowns, bridges, and dental implants can be done in combination with dental implants within the same arch of teeth. It's important to note that people with heavy grinding or clenching patterns may not be suitable candidates for dental veneers.

## Going through the process

The first step is to select and meet your cosmetic team. This includes the cosmetic dentist and a

highly trained dental ceramist. There should be active participation between you, the dentist, and the dental ceramist so that you can explain the cosmetic and functional goals you are trying to achieve. The dentist may make impressions of your teeth so that the final shape and form of the veneers can be designed prior to the actual preparation and fabrication.

Lastly, the dentist may take portrait and facial photographs, which will help the dentist and ceramist design the veneers to blend and match the features of your face and smile.

Once you've had your consultation, there are two visits involved in making veneers. The first appointment will be to prepare your teeth, and the second appointment will be to bond them into place several weeks later. To prepare a tooth for a veneer, your dentist will remove about one-half a millimeter of enamel from the tooth surface, which is an amount nearly equal to the thickness of the veneer to be added back to the tooth surface. Next, your dentist will make an impression of your prepared teeth, so that the dental ceramist can hand-craft the veneers based upon the cosmetic changes desired. Then, temporary veneers will be placed to avoid noticing the prepared teeth and to prevent sensitivity.

At the bonding appointment, your dentist will temporarily place the veneers on your tooth to examine the fit, color, and the overall cosmetic change. Next, to get your tooth ready to receive the veneer, they will be cleaned, polished, and etched, which roughens the tooth to allow for a strong bonding process. A special cement is used to permanently bond the veneer to your tooth. The final steps involve removing any excess cement, evaluating your bite, and making any final adjustments to the veneer as necessary.

## What are the disadvantages?

The process to making veneers is usually irreversible, as it involves the removal of small amounts of tooth structure. Although it doesn't happen often, dental veneers could chip, crack, or become dislodged. And finally, the color of the

PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO



*Thomas Jackson, D.D.S., is advanced-trained in periodontics and periodontal prosthesis. Dr. Jackson is a board-certified periodontist and the founder of the Chicago Center for Cosmetic & Implant Dentistry. He lectures nationally and internationally on issues relating to dental implants and cosmetics. Dr. Jackson is an associate professor at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine, and he may be reached at 847-842-6900.*

veneer cannot be changed through bleaching once cemented in place.

## Selecting your cosmetic dentist

As you select a cosmetic dentist, it is important to ask to see photographs of the dentist's actual finished veneers and ask for a list of patients whom you can ask about their experience. Dental veneers play a large role in cosmetic dentistry. They allow for a change in tooth shape and color with minimally invasive procedures. If you think dental veneers could be a good option for you, consult your cosmetic dentist for a thorough discussion of the options. 