



SMILES

Calgarians are turning to cosmetic dentistry to look good – and feel better

• By Derek Sankey

Illustrations by Dena Seiferling

Phil Carpentier knew his smile was less than perfect. The 24-year-old Calgarian's upper teeth were crooked, slanted inward. And although he was always self-conscious about his teeth, he could never bring himself to do anything about it – until last spring.

With his wedding approaching in August, Carpentier couldn't face the thought of smiling through all those wedding photos. "It was something I didn't like about myself," he says of his teeth. "The wedding finally got me moving on it."

Carpentier visited dentist Larry Stanleigh to explore his options. He discovered that he could address his problem over time with braces or he could opt for a cosmetic procedure to correct his smile through a process involving the creation of eight veneers – ultra-thin, custom-made laminates made of porcelain or composites that are bonded to teeth. With only weeks before his wedding, lengthy orthodontics were out. He chose the cosmetic route, and after a few appointments over six to eight weeks, the work was complete.

"It made a huge difference," Carpentier says. Not only was his smile corrected, but his self-esteem and entire outlook began to change. "Mainly, it's the self-confidence. It's one of those things that you

hesitate about for years, primarily due to a lack of knowledge," he says. "What surprised me most was the simplicity and ease of the change."

His fiancée, Alison – now his wife – was impressed with the visible improvement, but Phil believes it gave them both an inner boost. "I think she was glad I did it for myself more than anything," he says. "She felt better because I felt better about myself."

Carpentier's story is a familiar one, says Stanleigh. An increasing number of people are turning to cosmetic dentistry to help straighten, brighten or otherwise repair their teeth as they search for the perfect smile. One study produced by the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry estimates that the number of patients seeking cosmetic procedures in 2006 was about 2.69 million, up 12.8 per cent from the previous year. In his practice, Stanleigh reports a four-fold increase in the number of people getting dental implants to replace missing teeth, while laser whitening has tripled and entire "smile makeovers" have doubled in the past two years.

The surge in demand for cosmetic dentistry is understandable. Traditionally, a nice smile has been associated with beauty, good health and even wealth. Moreover, smiling is a natural part of our body language – most of us use it to convey subtle expressions or friendliness every day.

The difference today is that dramatic advances in terms of materials and procedures associated with cosmetic dentistry have made it easier to enhance a smile. These improvements are happening at a time when people – everyone from millennials to baby boomers – are paying more attention to their physical appearance.

But while cosmetic procedures can produce a brighter smile, can they enhance our health?

Stanleigh says yes. A dazzling smile is much more than a key feature of a pretty face. It can also impact our overall sense of health, self-esteem and mental outlook on life, and can even alter our career paths. "It's not just all about beauty," says Stanleigh. "It's about better function and better health." Teeth that aren't aligned or malformed can impair your ability to eat nutritiously, while the emotional and mental health toll can be profound for some people.

A patient's overall well-being is an important factor for many of those who practice cosmetic dentistry. Stanleigh, for example, takes a holistic approach with his patients by getting them to address all of the factors that affect their health. Making a cosmetic change alone won't change your life, but it can provide a visible reminder of what's possible. "If the smile is good and the rest of you isn't, then it's going to look artificial," he says. "What we, as the dentist-artists need to do in communicating with



Denise Furst (left) says she no longer worries about her smile. Phil Carpentier says he's pleased with hsi new look.

our patients before we do anything, is discuss the whole face, not just the teeth.”

Increased consumer interest in cosmetic dentistry – just like cosmetic surgery – has sparked debate about the nature and scope of the practice.

Some dentists worry that members of their profession may be attracted by the lure of profits into “over-servicing” their clients. Stanleigh agrees over-servicing is an issue, and stresses the importance of making sure you are comfortable with your dentist. There are all types of procedures available – cosmetic, functional, biomimetic, neuromuscular, aesthetic – so the relationship between dentist and patient is crucial. A little research and asking around about reputations is the best place to start. “For me, the key is time and communication,” he says. “Time to get to know the patient, and for them to get to know you and your philosophy of care (and) experience . . . so that their health is optimized at the same time as their beauty.”

While incorporating healthier lifestyle habits in

the dental makeover process can help a patient experience positive physical and mental changes, most people believe a nice smile offers other benefits – not least of which is the chance to make a good first impression.

A study produced by AACD, for example, revealed that 74 per cent of adults felt an unattractive smile could hurt a person’s chances for career success. The study also showed that when two independent groups of people were shown either before or after pictures of the same cosmetic dentistry patients, study participants who viewed the “after” pictures scored the patients much higher on perceptions of intelligence, career success, wealth and sensitivity.

Denise Furst definitely prefers her “after” picture. The 48-year-old senior reservoir engineering technologist had a cleft palate as a child – a congenital deformity caused by abnormal facial development during gestation that can result in the misalignment of the upper and lower jaw – and sought out

A guide to cosmetic dentistry

Here is a brief overview of some cosmetic dentistry procedures:

Surface whiteners: These products use special abrasives to improve the product’s ability to remove surface stains. Most products in this category are either toothpastes or chewing gums. Because the special abrasives in these whitening products are often only finer versions of what is used in regular toothpastes, they are unlikely to cause excessive tooth wear. However, the effectiveness of these products is limited to surface stains and should not be used as a substitute for professional cleaning.

Professional whitening or bleaches: Most bleaching products are peroxide-based and are actually capable of altering the colours of the tooth itself. However, not all tooth discolourations respond to tooth-bleaching treatments. Individuals contemplating tooth-bleaching should consult with a dentist to determine the cause of the tooth discolouration and to determine whether a bleaching treatment will have the desired result. This step is especially important for patients with fillings, root canal treatments, crowns and/or with extremely dark stains on the anterior teeth.

Laser whitening:** This technique is one of the most expensive ways to whiten your teeth, but it is also the quickest and simplest. The process involves applying a translucent bleaching gel to the teeth. A laser light is used to activate the crystals to absorb the energy from the light and penetrate the teeth enamel to increase the lightening effect on the teeth.

Laser, or in-office, whitening is the most popular form of professional whitening due to its convenience.

Bonding and veneers*

Bonding involves the use of a white plastic paste, called composite resin – a plastic that is semi-liquid at first, but that becomes hard and durable when cured with light. This material can be tinted to match the colour of natural teeth and can also be contoured and shaped to resemble the missing

part of a chipped tooth. It can be placed over a stained tooth, and it can make a fractured tooth look whole and perfect. Veneers are very thin acrylic or porcelain shells that are attached to the front part of teeth. Like bonding, veneers can cover badly-stained teeth, chipped teeth, uneven teeth and large fillings.

Implants*

Dental implants are used to replace missing roots and support replacement teeth, which may be fixed to the implant(s). Implants are not for everyone. You must be in good general health, have healthy gums and enough bone in your jaw to support the implant(s). You must be willing to see your dentist or dental specialist several times until the work is done, and take very good care of your implant(s). In addition, implants can cost more than other kinds of replacement teeth.

Crowns and bridges

When teeth are weak and heavily restored, they may need full crowns to restore their strength and beauty. Today, dentists offer milled zirconia (artificial diamonds) cores with porcelain applied to the surface that creates incredible strength and beauty without metal, eliminating those black lines at the gums. Bridges utilize the same technology but are used to replace missing teeth as well.

Contouring**

Tooth reshaping or contouring is one of few instant treatments now available in cosmetic dentistry. In this procedure, dentists use discs, wheels and points to shave off the surface of teeth to reshape their edges. Usually less than one mm of tooth substance is removed. This allows for the illusion of straight teeth, when the problems are relatively small.

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Larry Stanleigh**



a cosmetic solution that changed her life. "It has a major impact on everything," she says. "The way you project yourself, the way you learn how to use a smile – anything to do with self-esteem is incredibly important."

Growing up, she developed strategies to hide her smile, which was shifted over and not aligned properly with the rest of her mouth. Prior to her procedure, Furst would barely crack a closed-mouth grin instead of a full, wide-open smile. After having some extensive work done – she had 15 veneers on the top and bottom teeth, as well as whitening – she had to learn how to use the power of her new smile. "All of my life, I wouldn't smile," says Furst. During the first three weeks, that all changed. "My smile was so incredibly different and straight and centered. I couldn't walk past a mirror without looking at myself. I'm serious," she says.

Close friends were eager to see her new smile and remarked that she looked five to eight years younger. Colleagues inquired about what had changed her appearance. "I was just sitting back laughing because they couldn't peg it on one thing," she recalls, adding she ditched her eyeglasses at the same time and got laser eye surgery.

Still, the initial decision was difficult. "Was I nervous? Absolutely," she says. Finding someone who specializes in cosmetic dentistry that she felt comfortable with was an important factor in deciding to proceed. She was shown full mock-ups of what her teeth would look like afterward and given the complete range of options – including orthodontics. For about the same cost, she opted for the cosmetic solution, which she says corrected 95 per cent of the problem.

Costs associated with cosmetic dentistry can vary from a few hundred dollars for simple teeth whitening procedures up to several thousand dollars – the price of a small car – for more extensive work, such as veneers or dental implants. Because most procedures are not considered medically necessary, patients must be aware that insurance coverage may be limited, depending non their plan.

Stanleigh and others emphasize that prospective patients must carefully consider their options and first need to figure out for themselves what they're trying to achieve by turning to cosmetic dentistry.

If you're only going to get a procedure for cosmetic reasons alone, that might be a cue to think more broadly about your physical and emotional health. Still, being proud of a bright smile is nothing to be ashamed of at all. "Right or wrong, it's a societal thing," he says. "It's powerful."

Carpentier is just happy to look back at his wedding pictures and see his new smile. It couldn't have turned out better. "After it was done, it was exactly like I thought it would be," he says. "I was much more confident, feeling a lot better about having pictures of myself taken, especially at our wedding." ●

Derek Sankey is a Calgary writer.

5 steps to good oral health

As part of a healthy lifestyle and to help reduce the risk of oral disease, follow these five steps to good oral health.

1 See your dentist regularly: Regular checkups and professional cleanings are the best way to prevent problems or to stop small problems from getting worse. Your dentist will look for signs of oral disease. Oral diseases often go unnoticed and may lead to or be a sign of serious health problems in other parts of the body.

2 Practise good oral hygiene: Using a soft-bristle toothbrush, brush your teeth and tongue at least twice a day with fluoride toothpaste to remove plaque and bacteria that cause cavities and periodontal disease (gum disease). Floss every day. If you don't floss, you are missing more than a third of your tooth surface. Increasingly, experts are finding that an oral rinse, such as Listerine, done once daily for 30 seconds, will significantly reduce the numbers of viable bacteria and infection possibility as well.

3 Eat a balanced diet: Healthy food is good for your general health and your oral health. The nutrients that come from healthy foods help you to fight cavities and gum disease. Avoid excess sugar. It is one of the main causes of dental problems.

4 Check your mouth regularly: Look for warning signs of periodontal disease (gum disease). Gum disease is one of the main reasons why adults lose their teeth. The warning signs include:

- Red, shiny, puffy, sore or sensitive gums
- Bleeding when you brush or floss
- Bad breath that won't go away.

Look for warning signs of oral cancer. The three most common sites for oral cancer are the sides and bottom of your tongue and the floor of your mouth. The warning signs include:

- Bleeding that you can't explain
 - Open sores that don't heal within 7 to 10 days
 - White or red patches
 - Numbness or tingling
 - Small lumps and thickening on the sides or bottom of your tongue, the floor or roof of your mouth, the inside of your cheeks or on your gums.
- Report any of these warning signs to your dentist.

5 Don't smoke or chew tobacco: Smoking and chewing tobacco are dangerous to your oral health and your overall health. Tobacco use is a major cause of tooth loss through gum disease and may lead to serious problems like oral cancer.

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For more information, please visit:
Canadian Dental Association
www.cda-adc.ca

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