

Don't drill your own teeth! And quashing other rotten dental advice on TikTok

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Watch enough TikTok videos and you're sure to see one extolling a special kind of do-it-yourself dentistry. Not about brushing and flossing, except maybe flossing with strands of your hair. These are videos on drilling into your teeth and cementing gems to them or filing your teeth to reshape them.

People have been styling their teeth for centuries across the globe throughout North and South America, Africa, and Asia. But social media—particularly TikTok, where everything old and new is nip/tucked into short videos with trendy sounds and served up fresh to young eyes—has breathed life into trends like tooth gems. Celebrities such as Drake, Rihanna, and Bella Hadid wore them years ago. Now, some TikTok influencers are selling DIY gem kits.

But it doesn't stop there. There are DIY tooth replacement kits and bedazzled grills available online for under \$25, and recipes for homemade toothpaste and whitening treatments. The TikTok hashtag #DIYdentist has 2.6 million views. It's enough to make any licensed dentist or orthodontist cringe.

The professionals wholeheartedly agree that DIY dentistry is a very bad idea. Dental care can be expensive, and orthodontic treatment is usually considered cosmetic and not covered by dental insurance—which 65 million Americans don't have. And, according to the 2020 "Annual Review of Public Health" report, people who are [low-income](#), uninsured, members of racial minority groups, immigrants, or living in rural areas are more likely to have poor oral health.

So, is the high cost of dental treatment driving these viral trends among [young people](#), or is it the lure of supposedly painless, instantly changed smiles?

Dr. Ruchi Sahota, a Fremont, California, dentist and spokesperson for the American Dental Association, said she can understand why patients want to try DIY dentistry at home.

"I just don't know how [they] could do it safely," she said, especially altering the shape of their teeth. While filing teeth is something a dentist might do to smooth out imperfections or create space between teeth

during treatment for braces, for instance, some people are doing it themselves to smooth away chips in teeth or create vampire-like fangs for aesthetic reasons.

"When we practice dentistry, we do it with the background information of years of training, X-rays, and the experience that helps us decide when and how to do the treatment," Sahota said.

Even tooth gems applied correctly with oral bonding materials are troublesome, she said, because they "are adding something to your teeth that will also attract bacteria. You're increasing your risk of cavities, of gum infections. And you're increasing your risk of chipped teeth, of inflammation inside your mouth."

DIY prices are certainly part of the allure. On Amazon, a 25-piece tooth gem kit was selling for \$12.99 from Tondiamo, a brand that also sells children's earwax removal tools, waterproof adhesive bandages, and chainsaw chains. The kit comes with 10 rhinestones, a mini-LED keychain to cure the adhesive, four wooden sticks, five disposable applicator brushes, and five cotton rolls.

But no instructions.

Reviews on Amazon complained of the gems not sticking. Some suggested using nail glue—which is toxic and can damage tooth enamel. But among Amazon's "frequently bought together" suggestions: a bottle of epoxy resin glue.

A gold-plated, single-tooth grill front for \$7.98 from TCOTBE and a set of silver-plated, brass fronts for \$10.99 from OOCB both advertised that "one size fits most," but reviewers said otherwise. "Save your money and use foil (old school way) if you want a grill lol," one buyer warned. Bleeding gums were a common complaint among the reviewers.

Perhaps the most bizarre DIY find was a temporary tooth repair kit for under \$25 from CZsy. It came with plastic "veneers" in different shapes for missing teeth, and moldable plastic beads for repairs.

It also did not come with printed instructions, but these were buried in the product description on Amazon's site:

1. Drop into hot water above 130 degrees for about two minutes.
2. Shape the size what you want.

No company information or websites could be found for some of these brands, but the products had one thing in common: a bar code sticker reading "Made in China." Instead of responding to a request by KHN for an explanation of its policies, Amazon removed the listing for replacement teeth. The other items were still available to order at publication time.

It's not just DIY dentistry giving licensed professionals a toothache. Vendors touting certificates to apply composite veneers and partials—dentures that replace missing teeth when someone still has multiple natural teeth in place—are sprouting up on social media.

Vendors like Marie's Beauty Bar in Philadelphia will apply composite veneers over less-than-perfect smiles—in this case, starting at \$1,999 per hour with a \$499 deposit—as a lower-cost alternative to porcelain veneers, which require shaving down the natural teeth. The merchant advertises veneer training for \$5,999. Marie's Beauty Bar did not respond to emails or voice messages seeking comment.

DIY dentistry isn't just a phenomenon of young people on [social media](#). "There are teens, adolescents, even adults that are trying these things," said Dr. Amber Bonnaig, a dentist in Marietta, Georgia, and a state

director for DentaQuest, a Boston company. "A major contributing factor is lack of access to [dental care](#)."

DIY can appear a viable alternative, especially since a person with severely damaged teeth, in [severe pain](#), or with mounting dental bills from repairing DIY damage rarely displays the disappointing results on TikTok. Social media users, for the most part, display carefully curated highlights, not adverse reactions.

"The 'cool thing' right now is all these hacks to make things supposedly easier or more accessible," she said. Caveat emptor, or let the buyer beware, she cautioned. Reviews from influencers who often receive free services in exchange for promotional posts may be biased. Bonnaig warned that complications could occur many days, weeks, or months after treatment.

Even when people aren't daring to drill their own teeth, they can do damage with other social trends like drinking "healthy Coke," a concoction of balsamic vinegar—which has a higher acid content than the actual soft drink—and flavored carbonated water. It's a recipe for severe erosion of tooth enamel.

Sahota has seen what these viral trends can do. "Patients have been drinking or swishing with lemon water, or maybe apple cider vinegar, and that has caused acid or erosions on their teeth," she said. "The patients will say, 'Oh, yeah, you know, I saw online that, you know, this will be better for my health. And so I've been doing it every night.' That's when I'll bring a mirror and show them exactly what the effect of that trend has made on your [teeth](#)."

Such low-cost hacks may end up costing patients far more in the long run. Sahota suggested that consumers looking for safe ways to enhance their smiles can scour the products on the Mouth Healthy site that sports

the ADA seal of acceptance. Bonnaig and Sahota both implore patients to discuss their oral and cosmetic concerns with a dentist.

Every tooth and every mouth is unique, and there is no safe one-size-fits-all DIY hack. "You can have a beautiful smile," Sahota said, "even if it's not perfect."

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