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Patients smile at getting long in the tooth

By OLIVIA BARKER

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Those whose smiles are more Mister Ed than Miss America have a new hope: the gum lift.



Pat DiGiacomo's happy with her smile after getting a gum lift and veneers.

NYC Smile Design

Dentists are raising or whittling away at tissue and/or bone to lengthen teeth and beautify gummy or horsy grins.

Also called crown-lengthening, the procedure has been around for decades to treat gum disease; it's only in the past three to five years that dentists have added it to their aesthetics-enhancing arsenal.

The number of gum lifts has increased as "the sophistication of a patient's discriminating eye has increased," says Nicholas Davis, president of the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry. "Now people want it all perfect," a smile that's straight, bright and white with a minimum of pink. It's no wonder then that the vast majority (80%-90%) of gum lifts are done in conjunction with porcelain veneers.

"By evening up the gum line, everything looks so much more in harmony, so much more pleasing," Manhattan dentist Elisa Mello says. She and her husband, Ramin Tabib, are elevating or trimming the gums along one tooth or more for 15-20 patients a month. Four or five years ago, they did "probably 15 in a year," Tabib says. They charge about \$300 for one tooth up to \$4,000 for a full arch (up to 16 teeth).

"You can whiten and brighten and straighten your teeth, but if your gum line is up and down, it's almost like wasting your money because you still don't have the result that you want," says Pat DiGiacomo, a veneer and gum-lift patient at Tabib and Mello's practice.

DiGiacomo, a boomer who works in information technology, always had been "self-conscious" about her teeth. Now, "I can laugh out loud without trying to duck behind a hand."

And dentists say it only sounds like a medieval medical practice. "This is a one- or two-Advil treatment," Davis says. Recovery ranges from a few days to a few weeks, depending on how invasive the surgery is; tissue can be lasered away, but a scalpel and/or drill is needed to extract bone.

Some aren't candidates for crown-lengthening. "If you have big teeth, then your teeth will look even bigger," Davis says. Also, those whose roots are skinny, tapered or short could, through too much root exposure, compromise the strength of their teeth.

But for adults whose gums never completely receded after childhood, the technique can significantly improve a smile, dentists say.

"It's kind of a scary thing for people when you tell them that they (should) have their gums cut," says Joseph Harmon, a Salisbury, Md., dentist who has seen a 60% increase in the number of gum lifts performed over the past five years. Patients pay \$700-\$1,400 for the procedure.

Diane College, who works the front desk at Harmon's office, spent about an hour in the chair last May getting the gums lifted above four of her top front teeth. "All of a sudden (Harmon's dental) assistant said, 'Wow,' " recalls College, 50.

These days, she readily flashes a "big, cheesy" smile. "I love it."