

Pain Free Dentistry

Afraid of going to the dentist? You needn't be with our guide to pain-free dentistry.

For some people the fear of visiting the dentist outweighs the pain of a toothache. In fact dentists estimate one in seven Australians suffers from dental anxiety and many avoid regular dental treatment simply for this reason.

The only problem with this form of denial is that refusing to go to the dentist can lead to more advanced dental health problems. And that means lengthier, more complex procedures when you finally work up the courage to make an appointment.

Dr Ian Jacobi, Director of Dental Services (HCF), says how anxious you are about going to the dentist depends to a large extent on your age and your experience of dental visits. "Those born in Sydney after 1963 when fluoridation was introduced generally have much less fear of the dentist because they have had much fewer procedures," he says. (Fluoridation has helped prevent tooth decay.)

"For this age group, going to the dentist produces about the same anxiety level as getting a haircut.

"Those who are slightly older, however, may have more anxiety," he says.

Certainly those of us who remember the dental nurse's slow drill may still dread fillings. Research shows early dental episodes such as these may be unpleasant enough to leave us with a dental phobia.

As we age, the thought of treatments such as root canal therapy can also strike fear. But, no matter what you have to have done at the dentist, you should be able to emerge from the experience without experiencing significant discomfort, says Dr Jacobi.

Choose Your Dentist

An important part of reducing dental anxiety is choosing a dentist you feel comfortable with, says Dr Jacobi. It is true that some dentists are more skilled at filling teeth or performing a clean and scale without too much discomfort than others. So you may have to find a dentist that meets your needs.

If you are nervous about being in the chair, you should also tell your dentist.

"He or she should keep you fully informed about what is being done, so there are no rude surprises," says Dr Jacobi.

Have your dentist agree on a "stop" signal that you can use when you want a break from a procedure.

Schedule your appointment for early in the day too. There is some evidence that our pain tolerance is greater in the morning than the afternoon.

Local and topical anaesthetics

A local anaesthetic, administered in the form of an injection of the drug lignocaine, will numb the tooth and gum area on which the dentist is working.

In most cases, the medication takes effect within a few minutes and deadens pain for about three hours.

But before the dentist even gives you the injection, he or she should use a topical anaesthetic. This is a form of numbing gel that is applied to the gum. After it becomes effective, you should feel no more than a little pressure when the needle goes in.

If you're afraid of needles, don't watch.

Anti-anxiety drugs

Perhaps you need calming down before you even get in the dentist's chair. If this is the case, the dentist may suggest a medication. However, Dr Jacobi says HCF Dental Centres prefer that such medication is prescribed in conjunction with a GP. It will need to be taken about one hour before your dental appointment.

Conscious sedation

This approach dulls your awareness without inhibiting body functions such as breathing and swallowing. One of the most common choices is nitrous oxide, sometimes called "laughing gas", although it doesn't make you laugh, says Dr Jacobi. You inhale it through a mask in a mixture with oxygen.

Nitrous oxide produces a sense of relaxation that begins almost immediately and ends when you stop breathing it. It has very few side effects and is safe for most people.

Nitrous oxide is usually used simply to relax a very nervous patient and then topical and local anaesthetics may also be used.

General anaesthesia

With this form of sedation, you are unconscious and unable to breathe or swallow independently. General anaesthesia is used as little as possible, and is usually reserved for surgical procedures on the mouth or jaw.

However, it may also be used for people whose dental anxiety is so overwhelming that it makes routine care otherwise impossible.

Although safe for most people, general anaesthesia carries more risks than other forms of sedation. Only professionals trained in anaesthesiology can administer it. Treatment under general anaesthetic requires admission into hospital or a day surgery centre, which will mean an additional cost to your treatment.



Visualisation

Sydney-based motivational speaker Glen Pattison suggests using visualisation as an effective way to relax at the dentist and to control pain response. "You can take your mind off what's happening by imagining one of your favourite places – the beach, a park, or a holiday destination," he says.

Picture yourself there and try to bring the memory to mind in as much detail as possible. For example, hear the waves on the shore, see the green leaves of the trees, or imagine yourself lying on the sand.

You should also consciously try to relax your muscles, especially your hands, which are prone to clench up in the dentist's chair. "Breathe deeply and slowly as you go to your imaginary place in your mind," says Pattison. "Use the out breath to relax the muscles in your body even more."

Hypnosis

Dr Jacobi says hypnosis can be an extremely effective way for phobic patients to conquer their fear of the dentist. It can be used successfully in people who can't tolerate anaesthesia because of health issues.

Regular dental checkups

Going to the dentist regularly helps in several ways. For a start, you get to know the dentist, the staff and the routine. But, most importantly, you catch problems early when they are simple and easy to treat.

That means there's less likelihood of having to have a major and possibly more uncomfortable procedure.

You also develop a trusting relationship with your dentist, and hear about new advances that will improve the health of your teeth and your experience at the dentist.

For more advice on dental issues, call 13 13 34 for your nearest HCF Dental Centre.