

Dental Anxiety: Got the Jitters About Seeing the Dentist?

If you haven't seen a dentist lately because of your fear of going to the dentist, you are not alone. Dental anxiety is a real issue for an estimated 25 million Americans. Whatever the reason, the jittery feeling keeps many people from receiving even routine dental care. There are several ways to overcome these fears and make your dental visit a manageable experience.

Common Reasons

There are several common reasons why people have the jitters about the dental chair:

- The worry or anticipation about the pain associated with the dental procedure or the fear that the local anesthetic will wear off too early or not take effect
- The feeling that the dentist is rushed for time and is not paying attention to your needs
- Sense of having no control, especially for those who have not established communication patterns with their dentist during dental procedures
- Memory of a previous unpleasant experience such as childhood memory
- Some are even bothered by the smell of a dental office

What Your Dentist Can Do to Reduce Your Anxiety

Long before your dental appointment, your dentist can take steps to make your experience more pleasant:

- Many dentists receive training on how to treat apprehensive patients.
- Dental waiting rooms today are designed to be relaxing places with current reading material, distractions such as soothing music, play areas for children and even computer games.

Tips to Reduce Your Anxiety and Take Control

The key to reducing your anxiety is to arm yourself with information and find ways that make you feel that you are in control.

Prior to your dental appointment:

- Find a dentist that lets you feel in control. Ask a friend or coworker for a recommendation.
- If you are seeing a new dentist, consider making a "get-to-know-you" appointment to discuss your anxiety and build your trust level. Dentists who take time to understand your concerns will be able to adapt treatment to your needs.
- Get the facts about any procedure. Sometimes what you imagine is far worse than today's reality.
- Be an active participant in your care. Ask your dentist about his or her policy concerning relaxation sedatives and advanced anesthetics — what may be used and how long it lasts.

During Your Dental Appointment

- Work with your dental team so they understand your fears and can even develop hand signals to help communicate during the appointment.

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- Schedule your visit when you are not rushed or under pressure, such as in the morning or on Saturday.
- If the sound of treatment bothers you, bring a portable audio player and headset so you can listen to your favorite music.
- Visualization of a beach, clouds or a place that has pleasant associations for you can help take your mind off matters at hand.
- Focus on breathing regularly and slowly while relaxing your entire body.
- Avoid coffee, tea and other caffeinated beverages prior to a dental visit. Caffeine can make you more nervous.
- Avoid sugary foods in favor of the more calming effects of high-protein foods before your appointment.

If you have an uneasy feeling about going to the dentist — find a dentist who can put you at ease -and put you in control of your dental experience. There are many steps you can take so that you can get the oral health care necessary to maintain healthy teeth and gums. It is important to find a way to work through this fear, not only for your oral health, but for your overall health.

Sources: Academy of General Dentistry: www.agd.org; American Dental Association: www.ada.org