



**Supporting
you with
dental anxiety.**

Lots of people get nervous or worried about going to the dentist. This is called dental anxiety.

You may have low or moderate levels of anxiety, where you feel anxious but can cope. Or your levels of anxiety may be high or extreme. If your anxiety is so bad that you don't go to the dentist at all, even when you need treatment, you may have dental phobia. Some people with dental phobia have panic attacks at the thought of going to the dentist.

In the UK, around **4 in every 10 adults** have a fear of the dentist. And around **1 in every 10 adults** have some form of extreme dental anxiety. Children can have dental anxiety too. If you have dental anxiety or dental phobia, it's important to get the help you need. That will help you to keep going to the dentist, which is vital for your oral health.

What are the signs of dental anxiety?

Before a dental appointment, these are some possible signs of dental anxiety:

- sweating
- a fast or pounding heartbeat
- feeling faint
- crying or feelings of panic

What causes dental anxiety?

You can have dental anxiety for lots of different reasons. You may:

- have had a bad experience at the dentist when you were younger or as an adult
- have listened to other people's negative dentist stories, or read about them in the news
- have a close relative who has dental anxiety – some research shows dental anxiety can be inherited
- tend to be anxious about other things too

You may also be worried about what will happen when you go to the dentist. You may have a fear of:

- not being in control
- the dentist's drill noises
- injections and the needles used for local anaesthetics
- pain or injuries during treatments
- a choking or gagging sensation when having treatment



What can I do about my dental anxiety?

When you make an appointment at your dental surgery, tell the receptionist that you have dental anxiety. Ask to see a dentist who has experience treating nervous patients. Then, at the appointment, tell the dentist and dental hygienist too. Think about why you may feel worried and write this down so you can discuss it with them. Why not ask a friend or relative to go with you and help you relax?

If the dental team knows how you're feeling, they can make a special effort to help you feel as comfortable and relaxed as possible. They can talk you through your appointment and answer any questions you may have.

If you're unsure about anything, don't be afraid to ask. Your dentist can show you how the equipment works and reassure you.

Before you have any treatment, agree a "Stop - I need a break" signal with your dentist. For example, the signal could be raising your hand. This way, you stay in control - you can stop the treatment for a few minutes until you're ready to start again.

Bring your mobile phone or device with you, so you can listen to your own music during your appointment or procedure. This may help to relax you.

How can my dental anxiety be controlled?

If you're finding it hard to manage your anxiety yourself, your dentist may suggest you try some treatments. They may be trained to give you these treatments themselves, or they may refer you to someone else.



Relaxation

Practising relaxation regularly can help to lower your stress levels and help you to cope when you feel anxious, this really helps to make any treatment or procedure more comfortable. You may find it helpful to try relaxation and mindfulness exercises.

Some relaxation practices include deep breathing and muscle relaxation. You can find a guided progressive muscle relaxation podcast on the Bupa website. There are also popular apps you can download to for relaxation and mindfulness.

Relaxation can also be coupled with something called systemic desensitisation. This involves talking about your fears and ordering them from least to most troubling. You're taught relaxation techniques and then gradually expose yourself to your fears to help you overcome them.

Another relaxation technique you could look into is called guided imagery. It encourages you to channel your attention and focus it on a happy image. This helps you to relax, which then makes you feel less anxious.



Sedation

If your dental anxiety is bad, your dentist may offer you sedation. This can ease your anxiety and help you relax. If you're sedated, you'll be awake and able to respond to your dentist during your procedure. But you won't be aware of what's happening and may not be able to remember it.

You can be sedated in several different ways.

- **Sedative tablets.** Your doctor or dentist may prescribe a small dose of an oral sedative to take before your procedure. This is called oral pre-medication.
- **'Gas and air' (inhalation sedation).** During the procedure, you'll breathe in a mixture of nitrous oxide and oxygen through a mask over your nose. This will help you relax and ease any pain.
- **A sedative injection.** This will be done by your dentist, an anaesthetist or a doctor who is specially trained.



General anaesthesia

Most dentists don't recommend a general anaesthetic for routine dental treatments. They'll only recommend a general anaesthetic if you have very bad anxiety or a dental phobia and can't have sedation. To have a dental procedure under a general anaesthetic, they may refer you to the oral surgery department of your local hospital. General anaesthesia is carried out by a trained anaesthetist. You'll be asleep and unable to respond during your procedure. You won't remember it when you wake up.



Cognitive behavioural therapy

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is a type of talking therapy or counselling. It could help you to control negative thoughts and feelings about going to the dentist and change how you react. You can have CBT with a therapist, or try self-guided CBT using books, websites or apps - ask your doctor for recommendations.



Complementary therapies

Complementary therapies aren't considered part of conventional medicine. But they may be used alongside conventional treatments for certain conditions. Acupuncture may be used to help treat dental anxiety. Some people find aromatherapy - inhaling certain essential oils, such as lavender - helps too.





Try and seek help if you are worried or anxious about visiting the dentist as it's important to keep up with your oral health checks for your overall health and wellbeing.

There are many aids to help overcome your dental phobia and it's very common, so you shouldn't feel embarrassed about your situation. The advice in this guide should help you find a solution and if you're short on time, here are my quick tips:

- write down your feelings to help you understand more clearly what you're afraid of
- download a mindfulness app that offers guided meditations, breathing exercises and relaxing music to clear the mind
- take a family member, or close friend, to your appointment for support
- go to their dentist appointment as watching someone else could be key to facing your fears
- discuss any concerns with your dentist

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