

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.

More than half of adults in the UK reported having a fear of the dentist. And around 17 in every 100 adults have dental phobia where they avoid visiting the dentist. Children can have dental anxiety too. In fact, dental anxiety often starts in childhood.

If you have dental anxiety or dental phobia, it's important to get help. Dental anxiety can cause psychological distress. If you don't deal with it, your anxiety may get worse. And if you stop going to the dentist, the health of your teeth and gums may suffer.



What causes dental anxiety?

You can have dental anxiety for many different reasons. You may have had a bad experience at the dentist before, perhaps in childhood. Or you might tend to be anxious about other things too.

Going to the dentist can be daunting for some people. You may be worried about the following things:

- not being in control
- the dentist's drill or other tools
- having an injection or being under anaesthesia
- any possible diagnoses following the appointment
- experiencing a choking or gagging sensation
- fear of injuries or pain during dental treatment

What can I do about my dental anxiety?

When you go to your dentist appointment, you can tell the receptionist that you have dental anxiety, if you feel comfortable doing so. You can also tell your dentist or dental hygienist. Think about why you may feel worried or nervous and write this down so you can discuss it with them. Here are some tips for managing your dental anxiety.

Find the right dentist

Most dental staff will be used to seeing patients with dental anxiety. But you may wish to find a dentist who specialises in seeing patients with dental phobia. They'll be able to reassure you and try their best to make you feel comfortable. If you're unsure of any of the procedures, then they can also explain these to you and show you any equipment they'll be using.

Start slowly

If you haven't been to the dentist in a while, start with a check-up or hygiene appointment before you have more serious treatment. This can help you feel more comfortable with the dentist and the environment.

Take a friend or family member with you

Try taking someone you know and trust to your appointment with you next time. This can be a great way to make you more comfortable and ease your nerves.

Distract yourself

Don't be afraid to use distractions to keep your mind off what's happening at the dentist. You might want to listen to music or a podcast, solve a puzzle, or use a stress ball. There may be times that you have to sit still for treatment, but it's great to have these props on hand for when you need distracting.

Ask for topical anaesthesia

If you feel anxious about getting an injection, you can discuss this with your dentist. They may be able to give you a topical gel anaesthetic which can numb the gums before using an injection, making dental injections more comfortable.

Are there any treatments for dental anxiety?

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 and anxiety levels and help you to cope when you feel anxious. You may find it helpful to try relaxation and mindfulness exercises.

Some relaxation practices include deep breathing and muscle relaxation. For example, you could try progressive muscle relaxation where you tense and relax the major muscles. Breathing from your stomach (diaphragmatic breathing) can also help relieve anxiety. There are several popular relaxation apps you could also download to try practising mindfulness.



Counselling

You may wish to speak to a counsellor about why you feel anxious going to the dentist. They might ask you about your past experiences at the dentist and how they made you feel. This could help you to understand the cause of your dental anxiety, which may make it easier to overcome.



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.



Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) helps you to control any negative thoughts and feelings associated with going to the dentist. This will help you to change how you react to dental check-ups and treatments. You can have CBT with a therapist or psychologist.



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 one of a few ways.

- **Sedative tablets** – your doctor or dentist may prescribe a small dose of an oral sedative to take before your procedure. When you arrive for your dental treatment, you may be given a higher dose oral sedative.
- **'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.



Try and seek help if you are worried or anxious about visiting the dentist

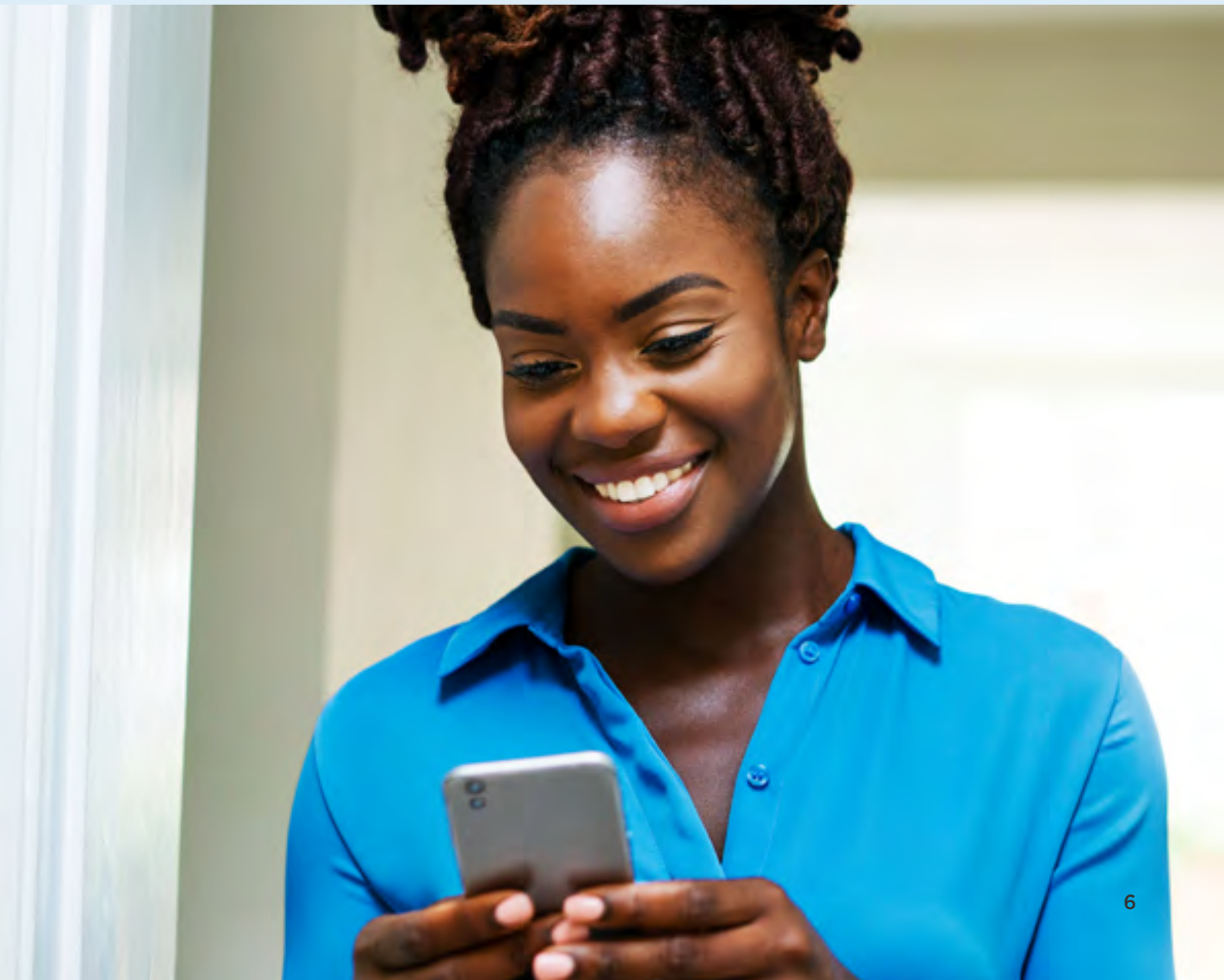
It's important to keep up with your oral health checks for your overall health and wellbeing.

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 exercise 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.

Dr Shaila Patel-Buxton

Bupa Dental Anxiety Management Expert



More information from Bupa

We have more resources that can help you if you're feeling anxious. Our **mental health hub** provides further guidance and real life stories of our customers experiences.

bupa.co.uk/mental-health

If you're a Bupa dental insurance customer

Call the **Bupa Dental Care Support Line** to speak with a dentist about your concerns, we may even be able to refer you to a dentist that specialises in anxious patients.

0333 242 9849

Lines are open 8.30am to 6pm Monday to Friday. We may record or monitor your calls.

This information was published by Bupa's Health Content Team and is based on reputable sources of medical evidence. It also has been reviewed by appropriate professionals. The information is not intended nor implied to be a substitute for professional medical advice nor is it intended to be for medical diagnosis or treatment.

Sources

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