

DENTAL PHOBIAS: WHY YOU SHOULD ACT NOW and WHAT TO DO

Dental phobias are really common. They are also more serious than you might think.

This sheet gives you some important facts about fearing the dentist.

1. It is common:

Research suggests that fear of the dentist is among the most common fears. It is as common as a fear of public speaking. More than 50% of Australians surveyed in medical research recently said they felt high levels of unease or nerves when visiting a dentist – but most of them went anyway. About 5% have a fear so strong that they are terrified of visiting the dentist and put it off as long as they can and struggle to go when it becomes an emergency.

2. How other people think and feel when they have a dental phobia:

The most common fears held by people with dental phobia are:

- Pain
- Being treated rudely (like being humiliated or criticised for having bad teeth)
- Embarrassed about their teeth or gums or mouth
- Fear of having a panic attack (losing control, going crazy, not coping with the fear)
- Fear of needles (or blood)

Like other phobias, people *dread* the dentist. Just reading this page will make their heart race and they will feel tense and irritable. Most people also feel really really embarrassed about their phobia – like it is stupid or immature. Well, remember it is common and is always understandable.

3. Why it is medically important to receive dental care

Dentists really can offer a type of cleaning and checking that we can't do ourselves at home. That is before they do any interventions (like fillings). There is a growing body of sound medical research that links bad teeth to major medical issues. Here is a summary of just some of those findings:

- (a) With teeth pain or absence of teeth later, your diet can get poor and this can make you vulnerable to diet-related illnesses like diabetes, osteoporosis and weight issues.
- (b) Clean teeth are associated with less general inflammation in the body, including inflammation in the arteries. This is thought to be the explanation for the finding that absence of teeth is linked to increased risk of strokes and cardiovascular disease
- (c) Teeth infections and abscesses are known to be linked to heart disease and endocarditis, which is a very serious condition affecting the lining of the heart.
- (d) If you are pregnant or might be soon, keep in mind that periodontitis (infection of the gums) has been linked to low birth weight and premature babies.

4. Other reasons not to put off seeing a dentist:

- (a) Test out your fears – it is very unlikely that they will come true.
- (b) When you have defeated your fears, you will feel proud, and you will feel able to go again next time with less anxiety;
- (b) Less bad breath;
- (c) Nicer looking smile
- (d) Better overall health
- (e) If you wait too long, your teeth will get worse and worse. Then, one day, you will need emergency dental treatment, which can be traumatising in itself – so do it while you have the luxury of time and can feel in control of the whole process.

4. Management Solutions

- ✓ Find a good dentist for anxious patients. If you can't get a recommendation about who to see, then a great idea is to ring a few dental practices and ask about their procedures for anxious patients. Pick a practice that has some approaches for really anxious people, rather than treating everyone the same.
- ✓ Once you are in there, the first step is to let your dentist know that you have anxiety. They *want* to know so that they can help you. Remember, the dentist knows how common dental phobias are. There is no reason to be embarrassed.
- ✓ Go further . . . let them know what your main fears are and ask for some ideas on how to best manage that. For instance, if you fear pain, discuss pain prevention and how you will communicate with the dentist if you are in pain or getting panicked. If your fear is of needles, then discuss that and see if they use the gel that does the same thing.
- ✓ Ask for medication. This is quite reasonable and some medication may be a safe option for you (it isn't always). You can ask your GP about this and the dentist.
- ✓ Practice relaxation techniques before you go. These can be found on I-Tunes and psychologists can teach you a variety of ways to master tension in your body.
- ✓ Rehearse what coping strategies you will use in the dental chair (e.g. communicate with the dentist, slow breathing, relaxation, distraction, self-reassurance).
- ✓ Use 'systematic desensitisation'. This is a formal procedure that is a favourite of psychologists for phobias (because it works!). The idea is to deliberately bring on a bit of the fear in a dose that you can tolerate and feel in control of the process. If you do this long enough, often enough, you will get used to whatever makes you that anxious. Then make it a bit harder – do something more to bring on a bit more anxiety. Do this long enough, often enough and your nervous system will get used to this next step. And so on, and so on. . . . It is tough but it really works and you are in control the whole way. It is wise to do this over a few sessions with a clinical psychologist. If the dentist you choose is patient enough, then they will end up doing a version of this with you.