

Coping with Dental Anxiety During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Objective

To reduce your dental anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic through education and preparation.

You Should Know

If you have dental anxiety, your fear of going to the dentist might be magnified by the thought of becoming infected with COVID-19 during a dental procedure. Even if you have been quarantined, you might have pressing dental needs, and you might have to visit your dentist for an urgent matter. The best way to deal with your fear and uncertainty is to communicate with dental staff, prepare for your appointment, and educate yourself about protecting yourself if you require an in-person dental appointment.

Now that stay-at-home orders are being lifted, dental practices are reopening. According to the American Dental Association, no cases of COVID-19 have been attributed to any dental practices in the United States. Dental staff know some patients continue to be worried enough to avoid dental offices, even if they are in pain or overdue for important procedures. Delaying checkups or care for dental pain can potentially turn a small problem into a root canal, infection, or tooth extraction – adding treatment time, higher costs, and even more pain. Dental staff can provide comfort and security during these uncertain times. Here are some tips on how you can work as a team with dental staff to cope with dental anxiety during the pandemic:

1. **Communicate.** When you call the dental office:

- Honestly discuss any symptoms you have, travel history, exposure to coronavirus, and dental anxiety triggers.
- Let them know if your situation is an emergency, and explain any underlying medical conditions so they know whether or not you are a high-risk patient.
- Ask about the office's infection control practices, starting with what happens before the visit.
- Inquire whether patients are screened over the phone before coming into the office. All patients should be screened, and if they are not, that is a red flag.
- Understand your dentist can disclose your Patient Identifiable Information (PII) to authorities for contact tracing if contamination occurs within the dental office.

2. **Discuss telehealth as an option.** Many dental offices are providing telehealth services – appointments by phone or virtual visits using video chat. Ask to schedule a telehealth

appointment with your dentist for a new or ongoing, non-urgent matter. If your dentist would like to see you in-person following the telehealth session, he or she will let you know. Your dentist will explain the risks of having a dental treatment during the pandemic.

2. Understand the requirements for sanitation and disinfection. OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) has set specific guidelines for dental practices to ensure the safety of its patients and staff. Dental offices have protective equipment and follow safety measures to help protect you, the dentist and office staff, and other patients. Dental staff have been instructed to follow these steps by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC):

- Frequent handwashing for 20 seconds or using 60% alcohol sprays or gels.
- Wear face masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE).
- Practice social distancing.
- Ensure proper disposal of used tissues, facemasks, and other contaminated items.
- Avoid aerosol-generating procedures (e.g., use of dental handpieces, air/water syringe, ultrasonic scalers) if possible.
- Consider using HEPA filters and ultraviolet irradiation of upper-room air to kill any circulating germs during aerosol-generating procedures.
- Allow appropriate space between waiting room chairs, or let patients wait in their cars until they are called in for appointments.
- Clinical spaces should be cleaned after each patient, and common spaces should be cleaned several times throughout the day.

3. Educate yourself. Dental offices are following new protocols and procedures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Extra precautions such as those outlined above have been put into place to keep patients and staff safe. You can find detailed information on your dentist's website or by calling the office.

4. Plan your dental appointment. It is important to know what to expect before your appointment so you can prepare everything you will need. Have forms, insurance documents, and a face mask ready to take to your appointment. Check with the dental staff to see if you can submit your paperwork and insurance information via or email before your appointment. See if you can wait in your car until the staff are ready to see you.

5. Use protective items. When you enter the dental practice, keep your mouth, nose, and eyes covered with protective equipment before and after your dental procedure. Keep the following items handy during your appointment:

- Facemask.
- Face shield.
- Disposable gloves.
- Tissues.
- Alcohol-based wipes or hand sanitizer gel (*at least 60% alcohol*).
- Disinfectant spray for your shoes, car, or other items.

Dental staff are trying to make patients feel as comfortable as possible during these uncertain times. They will follow a protocol to keep you safe, and you should do what is necessary to reduce your anxiety and keep yourself healthy.

What to Do

Do you have an urgent dental situation that might require an in-person appointment? _____
If no, will you request a telehealth appointment? _____

Write down the questions you will ask when you call to make your appointment. Have you reviewed your dentist's website for current protocols? Why or why not? Explain.

Outline the steps you will take to ensure you are comfortable during your dental appointment:

What else will help you feel more comfortable visiting the dentist during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Is there anything else you can do to lessen your anxiety?

Reflections on This Exercise

Did this exercise reduce your anxiety about visiting the dentist during the COVID-19 pandemic? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?
