Fear of Going to the Dentist: What to Do | Core Dental

Canonical: https://www.coredental.com.au/terrible-fear-going-dentist/

Details:

The most important step is to find a dentist you feel comfortable talking to, so you can explain your concerns and build a trusting relationship. Fear of the dentist is common, and a dentist who puts you at ease and works with you through your anxiety can make visits easier. At Core Dental we understand that fear of the dentist can cause emotional stress, and our dentists can work through your anxiety with a range of measures to help put you at ease. Please tell us how you feel when you book.

What is dental phobia?

Dental phobia is an intense fear of seeking dental care. People with dental phobia often delay regular care for years, putting up with pain, gum infections and broken or damaged teeth rather than facing their fear. If this sounds familiar, you are not alone, and help is available.

What causes dental phobia?

Dental phobia can arise from several things:

previous negative or painful experiences

feeling a loss of control, and fear of the unknown about dental treatment

embarrassment about the appearance of your teeth, or fear of being criticised for dental neglect

negative stories about dental experiences shared by family and friends

How can finding the right dentist help?

When you find a dentist you are comfortable with, you can build trust and say what you need. If you let your dentist know why dental visits are difficult, you should feel more in control during appointments. Our team will listen, explain what we are doing and work at a pace that suits you.

How does communication help with dental anxiety?

Learn about dental care and procedures, and ask for explanations and clarification of any treatment you might need. You have the right to understand what work is being carried out on your teeth, so that you can have input into treatment choices. Talking honestly with your dentist about your fear, and about what you feel you can handle, helps your dentist plan your visit.

What pain control and additional options can help?

Modern dentistry offers many options to help with dental anxiety and keep you comfortable during procedures, including topical gels and newer techniques for giving local anaesthetic. Other measures your dentist may discuss include:

Oral anti-anxiety medication, which can help you relax and feel more comfortable, particularly during longer procedures.

Nitrous oxide, also known as laughing gas, which can help relieve anxiety and stress and can also provide pain relief.

IV sedation, often called sleep dentistry or twilight dentistry, which allows procedures to be completed while you are in a very relaxed, sleep-like state through sedative medication given by injection into a vein. It is an option for people who feel they cannot cope with dental treatment.

Which options are suitable depends on your health and the treatment you need, and not every option is available at every clinic. IV sedation is offered at selected Core Dental clinics, so please ask our team when you book.

How can you plan your care with our team?

A useful first step is to tell us about your concern, any symptoms and your goals when you book. Bring relevant medical information and a current list of medicines. Our team can then check your teeth, gums, bite and surrounding tissues, take imaging when it is clinically appropriate and explain which options suit you.

It is reasonable to ask what the recommended approach is meant to achieve, whether there are alternatives, and what preparation, aftercare and risks are involved. Time, fees and maintenance vary with each person's diagnosis, and a written treatment plan helps you compare stages and payment arrangements before you go ahead.

Call 000 immediately for uncontrollable bleeding, difficulty breathing or swallowing, a serious facial injury or other life-threatening symptoms. For severe tooth pain or swelling without these emergency signs, contact your dental practice promptly.

The vicious cycle, and why it has a name

Dental fear is not only unpleasant. It has a described mechanism that makes it worse over time, and the published material gives it a name — which is useful, because a named pattern is easier to interrupt than a vague feeling.

The Victorian Department of Health: "Avoiding the dentist can result in dental disease getting worse, and a greater need for emergency care or more complex treatment. It can also feed the underlying problem of dental anxiety; this is known as the 'vicious cycle of dental anxiety'."

Read that sequence closely. Avoidance leads to worse disease, which leads to more complex treatment, which confirms the fear that caused the avoidance. Nothing in the loop requires a bad dentist or a bad experience — the arithmetic does it on its own.

What breaks it, per the Department: "Regular dental check-ups, cleans and X-rays of the teeth can prevent dental disease and help the dentist find any problems early so that simpler and less invasive treatments are needed."

Simpler and less invasive is the point. Going earlier is not just better for the tooth; it is the intervention that makes future visits less frightening.

And there is something a check-up does that avoidance has nothing to replace. "Most dental disease is lifestyle-related and preventable. By avoiding going to the dentist, not only are you more likely to need more complex treatments when you do finally attend, but you are also missing out on learning how to better care for your oral health."

One more reason not to let a decade pass. "During regular check-ups, dentists also check for signs of mouth cancer. This is especially important for those who smoke or regularly drink alcohol, and even more so for those who do both." With one instruction that stands on its own: "If you notice a mouth ulcer

that lasts for longer than 2 weeks, get it checked by a dentist as soon as you can."

On what dental anxiety and dental phobia are. The Department distinguishes them: "Dental anxiety is fear, anxiety or stress associated with a dental setting", and "when dental anxiety is severe, causing irrational fear and avoidance of the dentist, this can be classified as a dental phobia."

Its list of causes is broader than a bad appointment, and worth reading because several items explain fear that has no dental origin at all:

"a traumatic dental experience or other healthcare experience"

"previous trauma to the head and neck"

"other traumatic experiences, including abuse"

"generalised anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder"

"the view that the head is a personal area and accessing the mouth is an invasion of personal space"

"fear of loss of control"

"trust issues"

"anxiety associated with other conditions such as agoraphobia ... claustrophobia ... or obsessive compulsive disorder"

And it is common. "Dental anxiety is common and can affect people of any age." The Department also notes a difference between children and adults that argues for taking it seriously rather than waiting it out: "Children who have had bad dental experiences can likely overcome their fear if they are supported during further dental visits. Adults who are anxious about dental care tend to remain anxious throughout life."

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Dental anxiety and phobia, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 22 October 2025). Accessed 6 November 2026.

The techniques, and the four levels of sedation described plainly

Published advice on managing dental fear starts with things that cost nothing and are rarely offered because they are rarely asked for. Sedation is the last section, not the first.

The step before any technique. "It is important to let the dentist know if you experience any level of dental anxiety. Open discussion around the individual triggers of anxiety can help the dentist work with you to tailor a management plan."

Individual triggers, because the Department's own list ranges from needles to the loss of control to the chair reclining — and a plan built for the wrong trigger does not help.

The psychological techniques it lists , verbatim: "deep breathing"; "meditation"; "distraction (such as listening to music or the use of devices)"; "guided imagery"; "progressive muscle relaxation"; "agreeing with your dentist on a signal to stop during the treatment for a break (such as raising your left pointer finger or hand)"; "using a weighted blanket (bring your own)"; "hypnosis".

Two of those are worth asking about by name. A stop signal restores exactly the control the Department lists as a cause of fear, and it costs nothing to agree on before anything starts. A weighted blanket is on the Department's own list, with the practical note that you bring your own.

And a referral is a real option, not a last resort. "Referral to a psychologist can be helpful too. Short, targeted therapies including cognitive behavioural therapy can be very successful."

Then the medical options. "Severe dental anxiety or phobia may require medical management with relative analgesia (happy gas), anxiety relieving medication, conscious sedation (twilight sedation) or general anaesthesia."

Relative analgesia (happy gas). "A mask is fitted to your face, and you breathe a mixture of oxygen and nitrous oxide. It takes effect within a few minutes and wears off quickly." What it is like: "You will feel

relaxed but will still be awake. You can talk to the dentist, and hear what they say to you, but you won't necessarily remember everything once the visit is over." And honestly: "Occasionally people don't like the sensation it creates, and you can consider other options."

Anxiety relieving medication. "Oral anxiety relieving (anxiolytic) medications (such as temazepam) are sometimes prescribed by dentists or doctors to help anxious patients relax. A short-acting, small, single dose is usually taken one hour before the dental appointment." Medication "should only be taken following discussion with your dentist or doctor".

Conscious sedation. "This type of sedation involves receiving medication through a drip placed into a vein of the arm or hand. Intravenous (IV) sedation is provided by a dental sedationist (a dentist with advanced training in sedation) or an anaesthetist." What it is like: "you are relaxed and may drift off into a light sleep, but can respond to verbal prompts. Possible side effects include drowsiness and nausea after the procedure."

General anaesthesia. "Treatment under a general anaesthetic is carried out in a hospital setting by the dentist and an anaesthetist. General anaesthesia involves patients being 'fully asleep'. Some possible side effects include nausea and a longer recovery time than other forms of sedation." It also requires planning: "You will need a pre-operative (before treatment) visit to the dentist, and may also need a post-operative (after treatment) visit. The anaesthetist will also need to assess you before the general anaesthetic."

The Department's caution about general anaesthesia is the part most worth quoting , because it runs against the instinct to have everything done at once: "A general anaesthetic can be a good option for some people, but it doesn't help you learn coping strategies or get you used to going to the dentist. General anaesthetic works best when used in conjunction with other strategies, so that some treatments can be done without it." It adds a practical limit too: "Some dental treatments are better provided over several visits. This means that your treatment options may be more limited if you want all your dental treatment under general anaesthetic."

Three things to know before you ask for sedation. First: "Not all dentists offer treatment under sedation." Second: "Some pre-existing medical conditions or medications may affect the type of sedation you can have, or may prevent you from having some types of sedation. Talk to your dentist and/or doctor for further information." Third: "You should avoid driving home after having any sedation."

And on who may provide it. The Dental Board of Australia states that only dentists "whose registration is endorsed for conscious sedation can use this technique in their practice", so whether a given practitioner can offer a given level of sedation is a question of their registration — something you can ask about directly, and something recorded on the public register.

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Dental anxiety and phobia, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 22 October 2025); Dental Board of Australia, Conscious sedation, dentalboard.gov.au . Both accessed 6 November 2026.

Frequently asked questions

Is it normal to be scared of the dentist?

Yes. Many people feel nervous about dental visits, and some have a more intense fear. Common causes include past painful experiences, feeling out of control and worrying about criticism. Telling your dentist how you feel is a good first step.

What can I do before my appointment to feel calmer?

Tell the team about your fear when you book so we can plan accordingly. Learn about the procedure, write down your questions and agree on a way to signal if you need a break. Your dentist can explain

each step before starting.

Will the dentist judge me if I have not been for years?

Our aim is to help, not to criticise. Many people delay care because of fear. Your dentist will assess your teeth and gums, explain your options and work with you at a pace that suits you.

Can I be sedated for dental treatment?

Sedation options range from oral anti-anxiety medication and nitrous oxide to IV sedation, also called sleep dentistry. Suitability depends on your health and the treatment, and a dentist will assess you first. Read about who sleep dentistry suits .

Can children with dental fear be helped too?

Yes, there are gentle approaches for children as well. See our articles on helping a child who is frightened of the dentist and on dental anxiety in children .

What is the "vicious cycle of dental anxiety"?

A named pattern in the published advice. The Victorian Department of Health: "Avoiding the dentist can result in dental disease getting worse, and a greater need for emergency care or more complex treatment. It can also feed the underlying problem of dental anxiety; this is known as the 'vicious cycle of dental anxiety'." Each avoided visit makes the next one more likely to confirm the fear.

What is the difference between dental anxiety and dental phobia?

Severity and avoidance. "Dental anxiety is fear, anxiety or stress associated with a dental setting." And: "When dental anxiety is severe, causing irrational fear and avoidance of the dentist, this can be classified as a dental phobia."

Can I agree on a way to stop partway through?

Yes, and it is on the Department's own list of coping techniques: "agreeing with your dentist on a signal to stop during the treatment for a break (such as raising your left pointer finger or hand)". Fear of loss of control is one of the causes it lists, so this addresses the cause directly.

Can I bring a weighted blanket?

The Department lists "using a weighted blanket (bring your own)" among its coping techniques. The bracketed note is its own.

What other techniques are suggested?

Deep breathing, meditation, "distraction (such as listening to music or the use of devices)", guided imagery, progressive muscle relaxation, a stop signal, a weighted blanket, and hypnosis. It also notes that "referral to a psychologist can be helpful too. Short, targeted therapies including cognitive behavioural therapy can be very successful."

What is happy gas like?

"A mask is fitted to your face, and you breathe a mixture of oxygen and nitrous oxide. It takes effect within a few minutes and wears off quickly." You stay awake: "You can talk to the dentist, and hear what they say to you, but you won't necessarily remember everything once the visit is over." The Department also notes that "occasionally people don't like the sensation it creates, and you can consider other options".

What is twilight sedation?

Intravenous sedation. "This type of sedation involves receiving medication through a drip placed into a vein of the arm or hand", provided by "a dental sedationist (a dentist with advanced training in sedation) or an anaesthetist". Under it "you are relaxed and may drift off into a light sleep, but can respond to verbal prompts", with possible drowsiness and nausea afterwards.

Should I just have everything done under general anaesthetic?

The Department advises against treating it as the whole answer: "A general anaesthetic can be a good option for some people, but it doesn't help you learn coping strategies or get you used to going to the dentist. General anaesthetic works best when used in conjunction with other strategies, so that some treatments can be done without it." It also notes that "some dental treatments are better provided over several visits", so insisting on one session can narrow your options.

Is sedation available to everyone?

No. "Not all dentists offer treatment under sedation", and "some pre-existing medical conditions or medications may affect the type of sedation you can have, or may prevent you from having some types of sedation". The Department's advice is to "talk to your dentist and/or doctor for further information". Separately, the Dental Board of Australia states that only dentists "whose registration is endorsed for conscious sedation can use this technique in their practice".

Can I drive myself home?

Not after sedation. "You should avoid driving home after having any sedation."

Does dental fear get better on its own with age?

The Department's observation points the other way for adults: "Children who have had bad dental experiences can likely overcome their fear if they are supported during further dental visits. Adults who are anxious about dental care tend to remain anxious throughout life." That is an argument for raising it rather than waiting.

Is there anything I should get checked even if I am avoiding appointments?

One thing in particular: "If you notice a mouth ulcer that lasts for longer than 2 weeks, get it checked by a dentist as soon as you can." The Department notes that check-ups include looking for signs of mouth cancer, and that this "is especially important for those who smoke or regularly drink alcohol, and even more so for those who do both".

Related services and further reading

Are you anxious about your next treatment?

Who is sleep dentistry suitable for?

What is sleep dentistry?

Help! My kid is frightened of the dentist

5 tips to help with dental anxiety in children

Should I see a hygienist as well as my dentist?

4 things to avoid if you have sensitive teeth

Understanding your treatment

General dentistry

How can we help?

If you feel nervous about seeing a dentist, our team can help at any of our nine Core Dental clinics. Call 13 13 16 or book online, tell us how you feel, and we will arrange a visit that suits you. You can also read about what to expect at your first Core Dental appointment .

Core Dental at a glance

Nine Core Dental clinics across Melbourne: Southbank, South Melbourne, Caroline Springs, Carrum Downs, Epping, Wyndham, Berwick, Bayside and Glenferrie.

Open six days a week: Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings.

We quote before treatment starts and offer interest-free payment plans.

Call 13 13 16 or book online.

Contact Core Dental

Phone	13 13 16
Booking	Online through coredental.com.au, or call 13 13 16
Hours	Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm, Saturday mornings, Sunday closed
Clinics	Southbank , South Melbourne , Caroline Springs , Carrum Downs , Epping , Wyndham , Berwick , Bayside , Glenferrie

This article is general in nature and does not replace advice from a registered dental practitioner who has examined you. Results, recovery times and potential risks vary for each individual. This information is intended for people over 18. Seek advice from a qualified, AHPRA-registered practitioner before proceeding.

What is the first step if I am afraid of the dentist?

Find a dentist you feel comfortable enough with to explain your concerns and build trust. At Core Dental, tell our team about your fear when you book so your dentist can plan the visit around your needs.

How would you describe dental phobia?

Dental phobia is an intense fear of seeking dental care, and people with it often delay treatment for years. Core Dental dentists work through anxiety with a range of measures to help put you at ease.

What commonly causes fear of the dentist?

Common causes include past negative or painful experiences, loss of control, fear of the unknown, embarrassment about your teeth, fear of criticism for dental neglect and negative stories from family and friends.

Which options can help manage dental anxiety?

Options include topical gels, newer local anaesthetic techniques, oral anti-anxiety medication, nitrous oxide and IV sedation. Suitability depends on your health, and Core Dental dentists will discuss what suits you.

Does Core Dental offer IV sedation?

IV sedation, also called sleep dentistry, is offered at selected Core Dental clinics. Call 13 13 16 and our team can tell you which clinic offers it and arrange an assessment.

How does talking to my dentist help with anxiety?

Explaining why dental visits are hard helps you feel more in control. Asking for explanations of procedures means you can take part in treatment choices. Our Core Dental team will explain each step before we start.

How many Core Dental clinics are there?

Core Dental has nine clinics across Melbourne: Southbank, South Melbourne, Caroline Springs, Carrum Downs, Epping, Wyndham, Berwick, Bayside and Glenferrie. Call 13 13 16 or book online to find the clinic nearest you.

When are Core Dental clinics open?

Our clinics are open Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings, and closed on Sunday. Saturday hours finish at 1.30pm, and Bayside opens at 8.30am on Saturdays. Call 13 13 16 to confirm your clinic.