

Snoozing Dental Chickens Win!

Are you are a loved one afraid of the dentist? Does your stomach get queasy and your palms get sweaty at just the thought of a dental visit? Most people don't think of a dental appointment as an enjoyable way to spend an hour or two, but some people literally dread the thought of it, and so avoid going for years. What can dentists do to help these folks?

One of my main goals as a dentist is to prevent pain, both before and during treatment. When people with dental fears finally do come to see the dentist, it is almost always because they are in severe pain. Small problems rarely hurt. By the time people have pain; they usually have a big problem. It is to the patient's advantage, for prognosis, cost, and ease of treatment to treat problems before they get to the pain stage. Big problems are usually harder and more expensive to fix.

Have you seen or heard commercials about "sedation dentistry"? One TV commercial has a patient who thinks she's at the beach while her dentistry is completed. Do you suppose sedation dentistry can give you a short, low cost beach vacation?

Unfortunately no, sedation dentistry won't put any travel agents out of business. But it will do great things for nervous patients, phobic patients, or any patient who needs a lengthy dental procedure.

So what is sedation dentistry? Basically, it involves deeply relaxing patients by means of medicines, usually taken orally as pills, and often also with nitrous oxide (laughing gas).

OK, what does a patient experience while sedated? First, sedated patients are not put to sleep, but they may go to sleep. In other words, the patient is still conscious, able to breath, swallow, talk, and even get up and be assisted walking if needed. The patient is, however, very relaxed, not caring about what is going on in their mouth. In fact, they are often so relaxed that they drop off into a natural sleep, a nice relaxing snooze. I can't, however, guarantee a visit to the beach.

What does the patient remember afterwards? The answer is usually not much. The class of drugs that I use most commonly has a nice amnestic effect. That means that most patients will remember little of the appointment. They will also have an altered sense of time. In other words, a long appointment will seem much shorter.

Are there other benefits to sedation dentistry? Yes, there are several. Many patients can't have their mouth open for more than a few minutes without their muscles painfully cramping. Sedated patients, since they are relaxed, have relaxed muscles which are far less prone to cramping. Another big benefit is for patients with major health problems where added stress would be dangerous. People with heart problems, blood pressure problems, or a history of stroke related problems are often able to receive dental care the most safely when sedated, in consultation with the patient's physician.

Is sedation dentistry safe? For teenagers and adults, sedation by a well trained dentist is actually quite safe. It is always possible for a patient to have a strange reaction to a drug, but there is very little chance of serious problems. It is, in fact, much safer than being put to sleep because the patient still has all of their protective reflexes intact. The state of Texas requires dentists who offer this service to be regularly recertified in training programs to stay current safety and patient management issues.

If you or a loved one could benefit from sedation dentistry, you should check with your dentist to see if he or she can provide this service. A nice relaxing dental appointment may be just what you need to get your mouth healthy, comfortable, and attractive. It is a win-win situation!