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INSPIRING HEALTH
Comprehensive medical centre

MY FEAR OF THE DENTIST

Q. Why am I afraid of the dentist?

A. Being 'afraid of the dentist' may mean different things to different people. It will probably help if you work out just what it is that worries you most.

Maybe the sounds and smells bring back memories of bad experiences as a child, or make you think that having treatment will hurt.

The good news is that more and more dentists now understand their patients' fears. They realise that kindness and gentleness can do a lot to make dental treatment an acceptable, normal part of life.

Q. I have been scared of the dentist for a long time what is it like now?

A. Dental techniques have improved so much over the last few years that modern dental treatment can now be completely painless. Despite this, most people still feel a little nervous at the thought of going to the dentist.

If you have not been to see a dentist for some time, you will probably find that things have improved a lot since your last visit. The general attitude is likely to be more relaxed, the dental techniques and safety procedures will be much better, and the equipment will be more up to date.

Q. How do I choose a dentist?

A. Many dentists today offer special treatment for nervous patients. The first fear to deal with is the fear of telling other people that you are afraid of dental treatment. If you can discuss it with your friends or colleagues you are likely to find someone else who has similar problems. They may be able to recommend a dentist to you. A dentist who is personally recommended by another nervous person is usually a very good choice.

Q. Do some practices specialise in treating nervous patients?

A. Yes. This means that they should be used to dealing with nervous patients regularly. If you are nervous about dental treatment, you need to be looked after by a dental practice that will take special care of you. You may need to travel some distance, but it will be worth the effort when you are no longer afraid.

Q. I haven't been to the dentist in a long time, will I need a lot of treatment?

A. Years ago it was normal for people to need fillings every time they went to their dentist, but things have changed for the better now. The dental team will now want to help you have, and keep, a healthy mouth and healthy teeth. Using a fluoride toothpaste will help to strengthen your teeth and prevent decay. Therefore, you may be surprised at how little treatment you need.

Teeth are for life and can last a lifetime if they are looked after properly. If you can get your mouth healthy, with the help of the dental team, you should need less treatment and there will be less for them to do in the future.

It is important to keep up your regular visits to the dental team. The team will not just check for tooth decay, but will also help you prevent gum disease.

Once your mouth is healthy, your visits to the practice will often just be easy sessions for checking and cleaning.

Q. How do I start?

A. It may be helpful for you to see the practice before you arrange an appointment. Call in to speak to the receptionist, and see what the atmosphere is like. Do the other people there look cheerful and happy? Does it give you a feeling of confidence? Perhaps you could meet the dentist and have a look around the practice as a visitor.

Q. What will happen at the first appointment?

A. Your first appointment should just be for a consultation. See it as an opportunity for you to 'interview' the dentist, receptionist and other members of the team, and have a chat about what to expect next.

Q. Should I tell the dental team that I am nervous?

A. Yes. Make sure that the team know you are nervous, so that they can help you. Tell your dental team what it is that you particularly dislike about dental treatment. If you think you know the reason, tell your dental team what may have caused your fear.

Q. I am afraid of injections, what can I do?

A. Many people are scared of the local anaesthetic injection needed to numb the tooth. Again, be sure to tell the dental team that this is something that bothers you. There are anaesthetic gels that can be applied to the area of the gum before the injection. This gel numbs the gum so that you cannot feel the needle.

Q. What is the best time of day to visit the dentist?

A. Book appointments at a time of day when you feel at your best, and when you do not have any other commitments to worry about. Allow plenty of time so that you can get to the practice in a relaxed frame of mind - arriving in a rush will only make you feel more nervous. It is usually best to have something to eat before you go, so there is no chance of you feeling faint while you are in the chair.

Q. Can I take a friend with me?

A. People often feel better if a friend comes with them to the practice. Think about what would suit you best. A reassuring and capable friend is often a great help.

Q. Can I take anything with me?

A. Listening to music is a good way to help you relax. Some practices have it playing in the treatment rooms, but the best way is to take headphones and your phone or MP3 player so that you can have your own choice of music.

Q. I have gone for a check-up, what do I do next?

A. Take things one step at a time. Discuss any proposed treatment with your dentist, and decide what you feel you can cope with. This may be no more than an examination with a dental mirror first. If you succeed with that, you may feel you could have your teeth polished next, perhaps by the dental hygienist. Don't be afraid to say when you have had enough, there is usually no reason to hurry through the dental treatment.

Q. What else can I do to help me relax during treatment?

A. Thinking hard about something other than the treatment is a good distraction. Try to solve a puzzle in your mind, or perhaps work out a plan for each day of next year's holiday.

Or give yourself something tricky to do-try to wiggle each toe in turn, without moving any of the others.

Q. Can I ask the dental team to stop if I need to?

A. Before the treatment is started, agree with your dental team a sign that means 'stop now - I need a break'. Usually you can just raise your hand, and the treatment can be stopped for a few minutes until you are ready to start again. Once you know that you can control the situation you will feel more confident.

Q. What techniques can the practice use to help me?

A. This will depend on which techniques the practice is experienced in, and which you feel would help you most.

Some practices offer several types of sedation, including inhalation ('gas and air') and intravenous (an injection).

Other practices may offer hypnosis and relaxation techniques. You would learn these techniques yourself, which would allow you to gain control over your feelings of distress or fear.

Counselling is another way of dealing with feelings of anxiety. This is usually carried out by a member of the practice team, in a room away from the surgery. You would be encouraged to discuss your fears so that you can deal with them and overcome them.

Q. Can I go to sleep for treatment?

A. General anaesthetics are now only rarely available for routine treatment. If a general anaesthetic is needed, it is done in a theatre where the necessary safety equipment is available.

Q. Will things get better with time?

A. As you get to know and trust your dentist and other members of the dental team, you will find your fears start to lessen. In time you will gain control over your fears, and dental care can become a normal part of your life.

Q. What will it cost me?

A. There may be an extra charge for some sedation and relaxation techniques on top of the normal cost of treatment. It is always recommended that you get a written estimate before starting treatment.

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