



Spa Dentistry

Indulgent treatments reduce the stress of once-dreaded appointments.

By Jennifer Bails for MSN Health & Fitness

Welcome to the dental spa. Lean back and relax, open your mouth and say "Spaaaaa!" In an effort to make visiting the tooth doctor more restful, stress-free—and yes, even enjoyable—some dentists are indulging patients with complimentary spa treatments during their appointments.

The trend of combining dental work with pampering perks at no extra charge has grown in popularity in the past few years, as dentists try to attract more patients in an increasingly competitive market, says Dr. Lorin Berland, a cosmetic dentist who runs a "dental spa" in Dallas. The higher cost of adding spa-like elements to his practice pays for itself through satisfied customers and referrals, Berland says.

"It's definitely a different concept based on trying to make your patients more comfortable and listening to their needs," he says.

Massage

Therapeutic massage helps patients relax and dramatically reduces anxiety levels, says Dr. Debra Gray King, president of the Atlanta Center for Cosmetic Dentistry.

King's dental office offers free arm and neck rubs from a licensed massage therapist during procedures ranging from routine cleanings to complete smile redesign.

When patients are calmer, there is a lower risk of accidental injury from dental instruments than if they are squirming in their chairs. Also, their blood pressure drops and the body produces less of the stress hormone adrenaline. In turn, lower doses of anesthetic are needed to achieve the same numbing effect in the mouth, King explains.

And these findings don't just apply to upscale, boutique dental practices.

In a 2002 article in the Journal of the American Dental Association, dentist Dr. Larry Lawton reported that massage therapy provided "a way to relieve anxiety and help calm the patient" and resulted in "a more positive response to treatment" among more than 250 developmentally disabled adults he studied in Medical Lake, Wash.

Noise-reducing earphones

The shrill, persistent whine of the drill is what many people dread most about visiting their dentist. That's why noise-reducing headphones can go a long way toward creating a soothing, peaceful atmosphere in the dental office and alleviating patient fears.

Indeed, a study published in March 2008 in the Journal of the American Dental Association concluded from a randomized clinical study of 90 patients that music distraction helps to significantly reduce dental anxiety.

Dr. Kent Smith of 21st Century Dental in Dallas provides all of his patients with noise-reducing headphones so they can listen to their preferred CD or tranquil nature sounds—and ideally tune out their dental work.

"It really helps to improve the mood of our patients," Smith says.

Aromatherapy

Step into the Dental Spa in Pacific Palisades, Calif., and you will be greeted by the relaxing scent of lavender and other essential oils infused into the air. Aromatherapy is one method Dr. Lynn Watanabe uses here to create an ambiance more reminiscent of a trendy day spa than the cold, sterile atmosphere of a typical medical office.

"It doesn't have that medicinal smell like every other dental office I've ever been in," says 46-year-old patient Pattie Fitzgerald of Santa Monica, Calif., who used to put off going to the dentist for long stretches until she learned about the dental spa alternative.

Virtual goggles

As you escape deep into the plot of your favorite movie or TV program, the drilling in your mouth is hardly a bother.

At least that's the hope of some dentists, who are beginning to provide patients with video glasses, also known as personal media viewers. These devices, which are worn like standard eyewear, use two small liquid-crystal displays in the lenses to give you a feeling of looking at a large-screen TV from about seven feet away.

Other dentists have installed flat-screen TVs overhead in each treatment area to help take the bite out of dental work. The screens can be used to broadcast anything from soothing outdoor scenes to the latest world news.

"It's a form of visual therapy," says Dr. Wynn Okuda, past president of the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry and owner of the Dental Day Spa in Honolulu. "I have patients watching movies and 'Seinfeld' reruns all day."

Distractions

Some critics argue that spa dentistry is a promotional gimmick that distracts from providing top-notch dental care.

It's still crucial to choose a qualified dentist, says Okuda, but spa-like amenities such as massage help to make dental care a pleasant, pampering experience rather than something millions of people dread—and avoid, at the risk of their own health.

"There is nothing wrong with making your patients feel better and helping them to overcome their fears in a more holistic way," says Okuda. "If dentists are willing to go to that extent for whatever reason, the bottom line is that the patient wins."