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## 4 Steps to a Pain-Free Dentist Visit

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### **Don't make excuses to put off that cleaning! Here, 4 ways to ease the agony of the drill, and stop dreading the dentist.**

Do you keep finding excuses to put off that dental cleaning? You're in good company; half of all American adults have anxiety over going to the dentist's office, and one third refuse to go at all. But the tooth -- er, truth -- is, skipping your twice-yearly appointments could mean more than a simple cavity: Poor oral hygiene can lead to heart disease, stroke, infection, and even some cancers. Luckily, new high-tech tools, pharmaceutical options, dentist training programs, and so-called "dental spas" promise to ease the agony of the drill. Here, four steps to a (nearly) pain-free visit:

#### **Step 1: Find a dentist you can trust.**

"All dentists taught within the last eight to 10 years have received training in communication skills and handling patient anxiety," says Eugene Hittelman, Ed.D., an associate professor at the New York University College of Dentistry. But anxiety comes in many forms, and connecting with a practitioner who really understands yours is key. "Everyone is fearful of something different," says Dana Gelman Keiles, D.M.D., a dentist at Northern Westchester Dental Center in Yorktown Heights, NY. "Some people are fearful of pain; some people are fearful of the smell; for others it's the sound. You really want a doctor who listens and can read your personal cues."

So how can you tell if a dentist will accommodate you? Simple — call and ask, and don't be afraid to press the receptionist. "The way they handle your questions will give you a good idea of how well the office deals with patient phobias," says Gelman Keiles, who is part of a growing group of dentists who also hold psychology degrees so they're better trained in understanding patient concerns. "I hear so many times a day, 'Am I the worst mouth you've ever seen?'" she says. "I laugh and say, 'Yours isn't even the worst I'll see today!'"

#### **Step 2: Come clean (and come in clean!).**

As in any good relationship, honesty is the best policy. If you mention your fears up front, your dentist can work to eliminate them. Whatever you do, don't take pain relief into your own hands. "Many patients try to handle anxiety by self-medicating before an appointment," says Hittelman. They take their Xanax and Valium, or they take a drink. "That's really a mistake — now they're coming to the dentist with chemicals in their bodies. They're much better off explaining their concerns to their dentist, rather than coming in as a wild card."

### **Step 3: Take advantage of new technology.**

Pain relief has come a long way since your first trip to the dentist's chair. You now can choose among pharmaceutical options such as nitrous oxide (which wears off within minutes), sedatives (requiring a designated driver post-procedure), and even local or general anesthesia, depending on how involved the procedure is. Some dentists use technology like Waterlase, a laser-energy and water-spray process, for everything from root canals to cavity preparation. The tool doesn't generate heat, vibration, or pressure — perfect for people who cringe at the screech and shakiness of a drill. Dreading a pre-filling needle? Rub-on lidocaine creams dull your gums before the prick. For more in-depth procedures like root planing, dentists can slide a numbing drug called Oraqix under the gum line using a blunt-tipped instrument, avoiding needles altogether.

Currently in the works: pepper-based pain killers that dull sensation without causing numbing or paralysis, and a plasma brush that uses chemical reactions to remove decay (rather than a drill). Make sure to ask about new tools and medications before your appointment, so your dentist can have them ready on your arrival.

### **Step 4: Open up and say "spa."**

A new breed of dentist's office, called the dental spa, gives you the illusion that you're in for a massage instead of a root canal. In front of each chair you'll find flat-screen TVs; you can also don noise-canceling headphones to dull the drillage. Some offices even offer mini massage treatments.

No dental spas near you? No worries. Get yourself calm before your next appointment by dabbing relaxing lavender or chamomile essential oils at your temples and pulse points. Bringing a heated neck wrap, a squeezable stress ball, or an MP3 player loaded with your most happy-making tunes can help too. While in the chair, practice slow, deep breathing through your diaphragm to counteract that fight-or-flight adrenaline reaction (your body's response to stress). And smile! By getting to those appointments, you're doing something great for your dental — and whole-body — health.