

Dentistry Doesn't Have To Hurt

By Dr. Chiann Fan Gibson

Unfortunately the first word that usually comes to mind when thinking about going to the dentist is the word "pain".

Our earliest memories of parents taking us to the dentist bring back flashbacks of fear and confusion. The big chair, steel equipment, strange sounds and people prying into your mouth is enough to scare any of us let alone children. Then add to the trauma the dentist pulling out a needle the size of the Grand Canyon, it's no wonder we're not thrilled to pack up the car and head to the dentist office.

But does it always have to hurt when going to the dentist? Absolutely not.

There are a number of things you can do to limit a painful experience. It begins by making regular visits to the dentist. For some reason we assume that if we "wish our dental needs away", then they will vanish. That's not going to happen. It's similar to a cancer. If you don't get rid of the dental problem, it grows into a much bigger problem. I realize that there are costs involved, but it's nothing like the costs when the problem becomes bigger. What might have been a \$60 pain-free dental visit could easily become a \$2,500 painful issue. Now that hurts.

If you do have a more serious dental issue, don't panic. In light of the advancement in dental procedures, dentists have many more options to limit your discomfort. There are even alternative measures including behavior management to help individuals cope with anxiety, stress or apprehension prior to treatment.

Shots seem to still be our biggest fear and almost unbearable to some. I'm sure you've heard your dentist say, "this isn't going to hurt but it might just pinch a little." Just hearing those words makes one assume it has to hurt. But if the shot is administered properly, it shouldn't.

The pain patients experience from needle injections isn't caused by the needle itself but by the rate at which the anesthesia is injected into the gums. The slower and more steady the dentist is when he or she injects the anesthesia, the more pain-free the injection.

Before a shot, topical anesthetics should be applied. Topical anesthetics come in a variety of flavors ranging from the traditional

bubblegum and mint flavors to pina colada, raspberry and banana flavors. Topical anesthetics provide about two millimeters of depth of anesthetized tissue. Provided that the tip of the needle stays within this anesthetized tissue and with a slow injection, then no pain should be felt. Many dentists will slightly rub the mouth and lip while giving the injection as a technique to diminish the "pinch" sensation. I very seldom have a patient say they can feel the injection.

Dental visits also can be less traumatic with laser dentistry. Lasers can be used for cavity removal, teeth whitening, gum-line re-contouring, hardening of bonding materials for fillings and the removal of bacteria from periodontal gum pockets. These options may help eliminate the need for the needle for anesthesia; however, this does not mean it is a sure way to prevent discomfort.

Another option for pain-free dentistry is conscious sedation dentistry, also called relaxation dentistry. Two options are orally administered sedation (enteral conscious sedation), or asking for laughing gas - nitrous oxide (inhalation conscious sedation). Patients generally experience a state of very deep relaxation. "Laughing gas" has been used as the most frequent and primary means of sedation used in dentistry for many years to control mild to moderate anxiety.

Unfortunately even with the techniques of the clinician, sedation options, proper dental maintenance and the advances in technology, the fear of pain is still enough for most people to skip their dental visits. But the longer you wait, the more it will hurt in both your mouth and your wallet.