

Understanding Sleep Dentistry: The Types, The Basics, and Who Needs It

Visiting your dentist at least twice per year is crucial to maintaining your dental health. During your appointments, your dental professional will check your teeth and gums, clean off plaque and tartar, and examine you for any signs of oral cancer. Unfortunately, there are many people who have a deep anxiety about visiting the dentist, whether it relates to pain, vulnerability, or any other reason. But how can you keep your mouth healthy while still managing that anxiety? Luckily, there is a great solution: sleep dentistry.

Sleep dentistry, which may also be referred to as “sedation dentistry,” can be used for a variety of procedures from simple cleanings to invasive surgeries. Through careful discussions with your dentist, you will be able to determine the best sleep dentistry option for your needs.

What is Sleep Dentistry?

Sleep dentistry is a form of dentistry performed after medication is administered to the patient. Despite the name, patients are generally awake during their procedures. However, there are some cases in which a patient would be entirely asleep, such as the application of general anesthesia. Most procedures are done with moderate sedation. Basically, while you will be conscious, you will not remember much of the actual procedure. At the end, you’ll feel like you’ve only been there for a few minutes!

Sleep dentistry is often administered due to dental anxiety or fear. According to [a DentaVox study](#), anywhere from 30% to 61% of patients experience some sort of dental anxiety. 39% are afraid of the pain, 24% of the chemical smells, 21% of the sound of the drill, 7% of being stuck in the dental chair, and 5% being afraid of the length of time they need to keep their mouth open.

Dental phobia prevents patients from visiting the dentist and taking care of their dental needs. For this reason, patients with dental anxiety or phobias may need additional work done by the time they do visit a dentist. This cycle leads to worse and worse dental outcomes. So sleep dentistry provides a way for patients to receive the care they need *without* stimulating anxiety.

Is It Safe?

Yes, sleep dentistry is safe (for the most part). However, being sedated always carries some risk. To mitigate this risk, take the following steps:

- Ensure that your doctor is educated on, and experienced in, providing sedation. If your dentist has no prior experience in sedation dentistry, consider visiting a new practitioner.
- Speak with your dentist about your medical history. For people with sleep apnea, obesity, or other medical issues affecting breathing, sedation is not the best option. Your dentist will tell you whether you are a good candidate for sleep dentistry.
- Provide your doctor with a full list of medications. This will ensure that none of your medications will react to the sedation and vice versa.
- Ask for, and carefully look over, any forms relating to your sleep dentistry procedure. This form should tell you what the procedure is like, the risks, and any potential aftercare. Remember to clarify anything you are confused about.
- Ensure that your dentist will keep oxygen and other medications on hand in case you have adverse reactions to the procedure.
- Because of the liability, most dentists will not allow you to leave a procedure with a ride-share company. As such, depending on your level of sedation, arrange a ride to and from the dentist with a trusted friend or family member.

Side effects may include dizziness, sleepiness, nausea, or vomiting. Dentists may be able to prescribe anti-nausea medication prior to or following the procedure to help reduce any associated discomfort.

Is My Dentist Prepared?

Most dentists can provide patients with nitrous oxide or oral pills to help with minimal sedation (you may read about these options below). However, not as many dentists are able to administer general anesthesia. Choosing an oral and maxillofacial surgeon or partnering with a dentist who has a dental anesthesiologist on staff, are your best options for a seamless sleep dentistry experience.

If you are looking to understand your dentist's level of experience, ask them about what sleep dentistry education and training they have received. For example, DOCS Education provides specialized dental training, as do the American Society of Dental Anesthesiologists and the American Dental Society of Anesthesiology. If your dentist frequently attends these trainings, or has in the past, he or she may be better prepared to handle your procedure.

Can I Have Sleep Dentistry for All Procedures?

No. Sleep dentistry is usually used for more invasive dental procedures. This means dental implants, root canals, periodontal surgeries, gum disease treatments, fillings, or tooth extractions. Most dentists will not sedate you for routine cleanings, exams, or X-rays. If your dental anxiety is severe, your dentist may make an exception or offer localized anesthesia.

Is Sleep Dentistry Covered by Insurance?

It depends on your insurance company. Many dental insurance providers do cover more common forms of dental sedation. However, some may not. Understanding your policy, and what your insurance covers, is your best bet to understand what you may have to pay out of pocket. If you do have to pay out of pocket for your sleep dentistry needs, many dentists will allow you to use a payment plan or CareCredit, which gives you 6-12 months of interest-free financing.

Types of Sleep Dentistry

There are multiple types of sleep dentistry. The type that is best for you depends on your anxiety level, needs, procedure type, and doctor ability. Below, you can find some information on subsets of sleep dentistry, products used, recommendations for patient anxiety level, and other pertinent details to help you bring sleep dentistry up to your doctor.

Oral Sedation

When most people think of sleep dentistry, oral sedation comes to mind. This offers minimal to moderate sedation, meaning that you will most likely be awake and aware of what is going on (though without any associated pain). However, in some cases, patients may fall into a light sleep. Patients take the pill around 1-1.5 hours prior to the procedure, making them somewhat sleepy and relaxed. While both children and adults may benefit from sleep dentistry, oral sedation is generally only used for adults.

Benzodiazepines are most used during oral sedation. These pills include Halcion (a sedative normally used to treat insomnia), Ativan (an anti-anxiety treatment used for dental procedures under 2 hours), Versed (an anti-anxiety treatment used for dental procedures under 30 minutes), and Valium (a sedative and anti-anxiety used for long dental procedures). Prior to the procedure, the dentist will prescribe the medication, as well as offer directions for its use.

Nitrous Oxide

Have you ever heard someone mention “laughing gas”? Well, they’re talking about nitrous oxide. This harmless chemical gas is combined with oxygen and administered via a mask placed over the nose and mouth. It is often referred to as anxiolysis, or light sedation.

Nitrous oxide assists with relaxation and comfort. Nitrous oxide is the best type of sleep dentistry for patients with mild anxieties. It wears off more quickly than other options. In fact, after removing the mask, the effects of nitrous oxide wear off within minutes. However, prior to mask removal, patients are generally given at least 5 minutes of pure oxygen to help control their breathing.

Nitrous oxide is the best option for pediatric patients because it is light, well-tolerated, and safe. However, it can also be used for adult patients, making it an effective and approachable option all around. Patients being treated with nitrous oxide do not have to make any special concessions leading up to the procedure. The entire administration of the laughing gas will be managed by the dentist.

Following a procedure with laughing gas, you may feel giddy and happy. You may also experience some oral tingling or numbness until the nitrous oxide wears off. Depending on how much is administered, you may even be able to drive home after your dental procedures rather than relying on a friend or family member.

Intravenous (IV) Sedation

Intravenous means that something (in this case, a sedative) is administered directly into your veins through an injection. This is considered moderate sedation, which means you are extremely relaxed and potentially drowsy, but still able to follow directions. IV sedation allows your dentist to control the level of sedative you receive. Because it goes directly into the bloodstream, IV sedation also works more quickly than other options.

IV sedation can be used to provide general anesthesia (described below). However, it can also provide lighter sedation, or something called “twilight sleep” or “twilight sedation.” While you will fall asleep during twilight sedation, you will not be out for as long as you would for deeper sedation.

Intramuscular Sedation

Intramuscular sedation is when a doctor injects a sedative straight into a patient’s muscles. The sedative generally kicks in quickly, within five to ten minutes. While this is used for many medical procedures, it is rarely used in the context of dentistry. However, this type of sedation may be used for children, particularly those who are extra fidgety or anxious. Intramuscular sedation provides relaxation for around 30 minutes or less, making it beneficial for shorter, less invasive procedures.

General Anesthesia

General anesthesia is also referred to as deep sedation. Many dentists are unable to provide this type of anesthesia. Thus, patients with severe dental phobias or anxieties should pursue a dentist who also has experience with oral surgery. General anesthesia is also used for extremely invasive, time-consuming, complex, or difficult dental procedures.

General anesthesia can be given via a mask, much like nitrous oxide, or can be prompted through pills or other medication. For patients pursuing this option, general anesthesia causes sleep. Patients will not wake up until after the medication wears off.

In cases of general anesthesia, and some cases of IV sedation, patients may be asked not to eat or drink for a specified period. This can be anything from the night before to the morning of. It is incredibly important for patients to follow these directions, as eating or drinking prior to receiving general anesthesia can lead to dangerous complications.

Who Is a Good Candidate for Sleep Dentistry?

Perhaps you have a deep phobia of visiting the dentist. You would be a prime candidate for sleep dentistry. But if your fears or anxieties do not feel that extreme, is it still an option that you should pursue? Below, you can find some considerations to help you decide whether sleep dentistry is your best option.

- 1. Do you have generalized anxiety that gets worse when you think about visiting the doctor *or* dentist, and receiving any medical procedures?** If yes, you would be a good candidate for sleep dentistry.
- 2. Do you have a fear of needles? Does being around needles, or having them used in a procedure, make you nervous?** If yes, you *may not* be a good candidate for sleep dentistry. Most procedures require local anesthetic injections in your gums to prevent pain. However, additional sedation options may also use intravenous injections. In these cases, the injections could cause more anxiety. Thus, sedation is not your best option.
- 3. Do you have sensitive oral nerves or prior bad dental work that has exposed your nerves?** If so, sleep dentistry is for you! Having exposed or sensitive nerves can be extremely uncomfortable. They react to temperature changes, gentle touches, and other stimuli often with a burst of pain. Sleep dentistry can improve your comfort during the procedure.
- 4. Are you making an appointment for a child?** Some children get nervous about the dentist and may have difficulty cooperating during appointments. As such, most children are candidates for light sedation, such as nitrous oxide. However, most children should not receive more intense oral sedation.

Other Potential Candidates

In addition to the above questions, you may be a good candidate for sleep dentistry if you need a heavy amount of dental work, if you have a low pain tolerance, if you have a bad gag reflex, or if local anesthetic previously did not work for you.