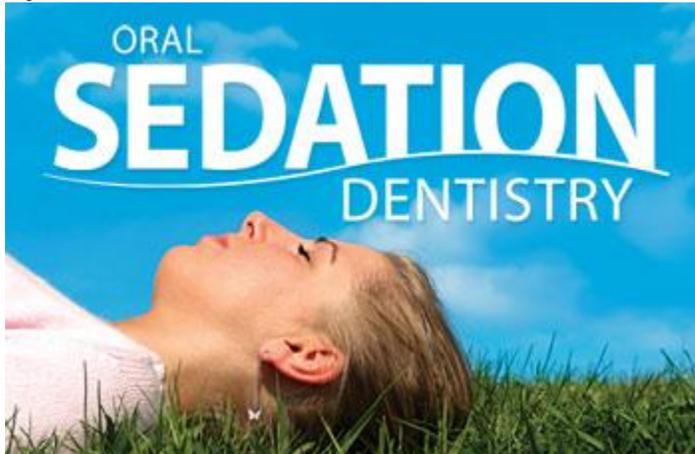


Oral Sedation Dentistry

Oral sedation allows you to relax both your mind and body, and focus on feeling peaceful rather than anxious

By [Dr. Michael D. Silverman](#)



Are you someone who is anxious or fearful about dental treatment and even worries about it all the time? In Part One of this series, Comfortable Dentistry in the 21st Century “Overcoming Fear and Anxiety” we discussed how you can learn to overcome and cope with these negative emotions and become comfortable with modern dentistry so that you really do have the opportunity to have a “Lifetime of Dental Health.”

While it might take some faith in the beginning to realize that this is possible, *Dear Doctor* magazine describes exactly how to develop a relationship with the right dentist promoting:

- Open discussion of your fears and experiences in a calm and safe environment;
- The listening relationship that you need to feel safe and in which you have the time you need to go at your own pace;
- Ultimately allowing you to develop the sense of control you need to reduce automatic anxiety responses.

Part Two bridges the gap to the next step in making your dental visits even more comfortable with the help of oral sedation or anti-anxiety medication. These oral sedatives or “anxiolytics” (dissolve anxiety) are administered by mouth (orally) to help transition you from anxiety to comfortable dental procedures.

Anxiety Just Melts Away

When you are afraid, your threshold for pain is much lower, you become hypersensitive to every sensation, prick, and noise. Fear and anxiety trigger the release of certain chemicals like adrenalin which put your “fight or flight” instincts on high alert. You anticipate that something is going to hurt and so you tense your muscles, even if it is subconsciously. In this heightened state of anxiety you experience more pain during and even after treatment. However this response can virtually be eliminated with oral sedation dentistry!

The whole purpose of oral sedation is to make you as comfortable and relaxed as possible. It allows you to let your guard down, relax both your mind and body, and focus on feeling peaceful rather than anxious. Your apprehension and hypersensitivity to pain melt away, yet you remain awake and in control.

Sometimes referred to as “comfortable” or “relaxation” dentistry, these terms are used to describe the feelings most people perceive during their dental visits, which are produced by oral sedation.



Safety and Effectiveness

Oral Sedation dentistry allows you the confidence and peace of mind to experience dental procedures in a whole new way. Hours seem to pass like mere minutes so that necessary dental treatment can be performed comfortably. When you are relaxed you allow your dentist to be able to work more efficiently by focusing on the work at hand, with the confidence that you are comfortable.

A variety of oral sedative and anxiolytic medications have been developed especially for these purposes. They have been subjected to rigorous research and testing and have a long safety record after decades of use. In addition several have “amnesic” properties, meaning that you remember little to nothing after treatment.

The safety of sedation medications is measured by pharmacists and health professionals on a scale called the “therapeutic index.” The larger the number is on the scale, the safer the drug. Oral sedatives and anxiolytics used in dentistry have the highest numbers possible on the therapeutic index, making them the least likely to cause an adverse reaction.

How to Ensure Safety — What to Let Your Dentist Know

It is critical to provide your dentist with a complete health history including:

- Medical conditions for which you are being treated
- Any and all medications prescribed by a doctor
- Over-the-counter medications, remedies and vitamins (including aspirin)
- Alternative or herbal supplements: Many people seek relief from depression and anxiety symptoms with natural remedies like St. John's Wort and Kava Kava. These may have a mild interaction with oral sedatives, so it's critical that you tell your dentist if you are taking them. The medications and dosages for your oral sedation treatment can be adjusted to compensate for any interactions.
- Certain foods: Even something as seemingly insignificant as drinking grapefruit juice can have an effect on sedation. The enzymes in grapefruit interfere with the systems that metabolize (break down) certain oral sedation medications in your body, so you should not consume grapefruit 72 hours prior to or immediately after a sedation procedure.
- Also be sure to tell your doctor about factors like smoking and alcohol consumption, since these can influence the effectiveness of sedation medications.

Administer the Medication Yourself

Oral sedation is a popular treatment option for many people because it does not require injection, so if you're afraid of “needles,” you needn't worry. In fact, once you're comfortable with oral sedatives, it may even be easier to have local anesthesia (numbing shots in the mouth) to further facilitate the ease of dental procedures. Medications are given orally (by mouth). They are either placed and dissolved under the tongue, or they can just be swallowed whole.

Many dentists prefer the sublingual (under the tongue) route which works even more quickly. Taken this way they are absorbed into the bloodstream more rapidly. Both methods are safe and effective and work in a matter of minutes. You can even try the medication the night before to see how it affects you and also ensure a good night's sleep.

Planning for Your Appointment

Once you and your dentist decide to use oral sedation for your next appointment, you will need to make some preparations:

- Your health history can affect your before-and-aftercare plans, especially for diabetics and smokers, so make sure your dentist knows about any medical conditions that you may have.
- You may be instructed to take oral sedation medication the night before your appointment to make sure you get a good night's sleep.
- You should not eat or drink anything six hours prior to your appointment unless directed by your dentist.
- Be prepared to take time off from work following your appointment. For short appointments, only half a day may be necessary. If a longer appointment is planned, make arrangements to take the remainder of the day off.
- You will need a companion to drive you to and from your appointment; you should not drive or operate heavy machinery until the medication has worn off; this will vary depending upon what drug has been prescribed — follow the directions exactly.
- Be sure to stay hydrated and drink lots of fluids following your appointment.

Which Medication is Right for You?

While your dentist will decide which medications are appropriate for your treatment, being familiar with the different drugs available can be helpful for you. Knowledge about oral sedation is not only powerful — it is empowering. There are several commonly prescribed medications, including, but not limited to Valium®, Halcion®, Sonata®, Ativan®, Vistaril® and Versed®. With the exception of Vistaril® and Sonata® they all belong to a class of medications called benzodiazepines. Benzodiazepines are prescribed for the treatment of anxiety, insomnia, agitation, seizures, and muscle spasms. Taken in small doses, they are highly effective at relieving the above mentioned conditions.

Each medication has a different **duration of action** (how long it affects you) and different **half-life** (how long it remains in your body). Dosages can vary greatly depending on whether swallowed whole or placed under the tongue in addition to the treatment protocols for which the sedation is being used. The drugs take effect anywhere from 20 minutes to an hour. Some varieties of the medication have “amnesic” properties, meaning that you remember little or nothing of your time in the dental chair after the procedure is completed.



Other Forms of Sedation Dentistry

Inhalation Conscious Sedation is also known as “Nitrous Oxide/Oxygen Sedation.” Nitrous oxide, commonly and inappropriately called laughing gas, has been used by dentists for nearly 100 years. It is an excellent analgesic (pain reliever), but a less effective anxiolytic (anti-anxiety) medication. It is administered through a nasal hood, which is similar to a small cup placed over your nose. Nitrous oxide is extremely safe because it is mixed directly with oxygen to provide you with a feeling of euphoria or light-headedness. All bodily functions remain essentially normal. You may experience a tingling sensation from the use of nitrous oxide. However, its effects wear off almost immediately so there is no “hangover effect.” In combination with an oral sedative, nitrous oxide allows your dentist to fine-tune the exact amount of sedation needed to provide you with the best possible experience.

Intravenous (IV) Conscious Sedation also known as “Deep Conscious Sedation” is used by some dentists, and surgical specialists like oral surgeons and periodontists who must undertake specialized training and certification in IV use. With this type of sedation, medications are administered directly into the blood stream intravenously (intra-within, venous-vein). The main advantage of this method is that it works immediately and the level of sedation can be adjusted quickly and easily. There is a higher degree of risk associated with IV sedation since normal bodily functions especially heart rate, blood pressure and breathing can be altered necessitating specialized monitoring equipment. The drugs used for IV Sedation are more potent when given this way than when taken orally and amnesia may be more profound.

You Are Not Alone

Years of research have been dedicated to studying and finding methods to alleviate pain and anxiety. There are safe and time-tested options available to ensure that you have a positive and painless experience. Step out from under the shadow of fear and into the calm of sedation dentistry. You are not alone and you don't have to be afraid anymore.