

# Sedation Nation

In 1978, when the punk rock band the Ramones wrote the song “I Wanna Be Sedated,” it’s highly doubtful they were talking about dental appointments. These days, however, many patients are saying just that before they climb into the dental chair to have a cavity filled or other treatment performed. Modern dentistry offers a variety of options that can make your time in the chair a lot more comfortable. One of the techniques gaining in popularity in recent years is sedation, which is used to help patients who experience anxiety and fear during dental treatment. When used alone or in conjunction with anesthesia, sedation can provide a stress-free—and sometimes pain-free—dental experience.

Local anesthesia is the type of anesthesia most commonly used in the dentist’s office for such procedures as filling cavities, preparing teeth for crowns, or treating gum disease. This method is available in both injection and topical form. Injectable local anesthetics (e.g., Novocain) prevent pain in a specific area of the mouth during treatment by numbing oral tissues and blocking the nerves that sense or transmit pain. But for those patients who suffer from anxiety related to visiting the dentist, local anesthesia may not be enough.

Many people avoid visiting the dentist because they have a dental phobia, sometimes related to a previous painful dental experience. Young children and physically or mentally challenged persons may experience severe anxiety while undergoing dental treatment, which can make the experience stressful. Sedation is used to help these patients relax during treatment, allowing them to access the comprehensive care that relieves pain and restores form and function.

## Conscious Sedation

Sedation can be divided into two types—conscious and deep. Conscious sedation (also known as minimal or moderate sedation) allows the patient to achieve a relaxed state where all bodily functions remain normal, and the patient is able to breathe on his or her own and respond to physical and verbal stimuli.

Minimal sedation is achieved through the inhalation of nitrous oxide (commonly known as “laughing gas”) through a mask, but sometimes patients are also given an anti-anxiety pill (benzodiazepine) to take while in the office, according to the Academy of General Dentistry (AGD).

For more information on anesthesia and oral sedation, contact the Massachusetts Dental Society at (800) 342-8747 or visit [www.massdental.org](http://www.massdental.org).

Moderate sedation, on the other hand, is achieved by using a medication or combination of medications that are taken orally or intravenously while in the dental office. All patients who undergo minimal or moderate sedation are awake during the process; however, your dentist will instruct you as to what you should and should not do while still under the effects of the sedatives after your appointment, such as driving a car (which is a no-no).

## Deep Sedation

Deep sedation results in a depressed level of consciousness whereby patients are not easily awakened and may not respond to some stimulation. Deep sedation is generally administered intravenously, orally, or in combination with gases. Patients who undergo deep sedation will also be required to refrain from driving, so you’ll want to make sure you are accompanied to your appointment. With intravenous deep sedation, a needle is inserted into the arm or hand, so those with a fear of needles may not necessarily find this method very relaxing.

Patients who undergo all types of sedation treatment may experience some level of amnesia about what happened during their dental appointment, which may be a plus for some patients, according to the AGD.

Sedation is a safe option for those patients who experience anxiety while receiving dental treatment, says the American Dental Association. However, it is not for everyone. For example, minimal sedation cannot be administered to patients suffering with respiratory problems such as emphysema or asthma, or those who are sensitive to the class of drugs used for the sedation, according to the AGD. Speak with your dentist to make sure you understand how sedation works and what to expect both during and after the procedure. Also, your dentist will want to be familiar with your health history to ensure that any medications you are taking or allergies you may have don’t react adversely with the chosen sedation method.

When it comes to sedation, it’s important to note that the patient’s safety and comfort are the foremost considerations for the dentist, and that you should consult with your dentist about what option is best for you in dealing with dental anxiety.

Sedation may just have patients saying, to paraphrase the Ramones, “Hey! Ho! Let’s go—to the dentist!”

