

Sedation Dentistry — Options for Anxious Patients

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Description:

Sedation dentistry at CSSC Melbourne. Happy gas, oral sedation, IV sedation and general anaesthesia explained. Safe options for anxious patients.

Details:

Collins Street Specialist Centre — Sedation dentistry: options for anxious patients

Dental anxiety is more common than most people realise. Research suggests roughly one in six Australian adults experiences high dental fear, and many more feel at least moderately anxious about appointments. For some, the fear is severe enough that they avoid dental care entirely — which tends to mean more complex and costly treatment when they eventually do come in.

Collins Street Specialist Centre (CSSC) has extensive experience with nervous patients and offers a full range of sedation options, so anxiety doesn't have to stand between you and good dental care. From mild relaxation to complete unconsciousness, there's an approach suited to every level of anxiety and every type of procedure.

Understanding dental anxiety

Dental anxiety exists on a spectrum:

- **Mild anxiety** — Feeling slightly nervous before appointments but able to attend and get through treatment without too much difficulty - **Moderate anxiety** — Significant worry that causes you to delay or avoid appointments, trouble staying settled in the chair, or needing reassurance before proceeding with recommended treatment - **Severe anxiety (dental phobia)** — Intense, disproportionate fear that prevents you from seeking care at all, sometimes accompanied by panic attacks, nausea or disrupted sleep in the days beforehand

Common causes

Dental anxiety usually comes down to one or more of the following:

- **Previous negative experiences** — A painful or distressing visit, particularly in childhood, can leave lasting associations - **Fear of pain** — The most frequently cited source of dental fear - **Fear of needles** — Particularly the local anaesthetic injection - **Fear of loss of control** — Feeling vulnerable while reclined with a clinician working in close proximity - **Embarrassment** — Concern about the state of your teeth, or worry about being judged - **Sensory triggers** — The sounds of dental instruments, the smell of a dental clinic, or the sensation of instrumentation in the mouth - **Gag reflex** — A heightened gag reflex can make dental treatment genuinely uncomfortable and hard to manage - **General anxiety disorders** — Patients with broader anxiety conditions often find dental visits particularly difficult

Whatever the cause, dental anxiety is real, valid and manageable. You should never feel embarrassed about it. The clinical team at Collins Street Specialist Centre is experienced in working with nervous

patients and approaches every individual with understanding, not judgement.

Types of sedation at CSSC

CSSC offers several levels of sedation, each suited to different clinical situations and patient needs.

1. Happy gas (nitrous oxide sedation)

Nitrous oxide — commonly known as happy gas or laughing gas — is the mildest sedation option available and one of the most widely used in dental practice.

How it works

You breathe a carefully calibrated mixture of nitrous oxide and oxygen through a small nose mask. Effects are typically apparent within 2–3 minutes and include:

- A feeling of warmth and relaxation - Mild euphoria or lightheadedness - Reduced awareness of your surroundings - Tingling in the hands and feet - A sense that time is passing more quickly than usual

You remain fully conscious throughout and can talk to your clinician at any point. The depth of sedation can be adjusted in real time by changing the concentration of nitrous oxide delivered.

What to expect

Most patients describe happy gas as producing a pleasant, floaty sensation. You're aware of what's happening but feel calm and detached from anxiety. Some patients feel mildly giggly — which is, of course, where the name "laughing gas" came from.

Recovery

One of the most practical advantages of nitrous oxide is how quickly it wears off. When the gas stops and pure oxygen takes over, effects resolve within 3–5 minutes. You can drive yourself home and get on with your day immediately after the appointment.

Best suited for

- Mild to moderate dental anxiety - Short to medium-length procedures - Patients who want to stay fully conscious throughout - Children (nitrous oxide is widely and safely used in paediatric dentistry) - Patients who need to drive themselves home - Patients with a sensitive gag reflex

Not appropriate if

- You have significant nasal congestion (the delivery mask sits over your nose) - You have certain respiratory conditions, including COPD or emphysema - You are in the first trimester of pregnancy - You have a known vitamin B12 deficiency (nitrous oxide can worsen this)

2. Oral sedation

Oral sedation involves taking a prescribed sedative tablet — typically a benzodiazepine such as diazepam or temazepam — before your appointment.

How it works

Your clinician prescribes a tablet to be taken at a set time before your appointment, generally 30–60 minutes beforehand. By the time you arrive, you should be feeling noticeably calm and relaxed.

What to expect

Oral sedation typically produces:

- Meaningfully reduced anxiety and a settled sense of calm - Drowsiness — you may feel sleepy but remain easily roused - Reduced conscious awareness of the procedure as it progresses - Partial or

complete amnesia for the treatment — many patients have limited recollection of the appointment afterwards - Slower reflexes

****Recovery****

The effects of oral sedation persist for several hours — typically 4–6, though this varies between individuals. During this period:

- You cannot drive; a responsible adult must accompany you to and from your appointment - You should rest at home for the remainder of the day - You should not operate machinery or make significant decisions until the effects have fully resolved (allow 24 hours as a general guide)

****Best suited for****

- Moderate dental anxiety - Patients who prefer a straightforward option that doesn't involve a cannula or injection for sedation - Appointments where a consistent, predictable level of relaxation is clinically sufficient

****Important considerations****

The depth of sedation is less precisely controllable than with IV sedation, because oral absorption varies between individuals. A responsible adult must be available to transport you to and from the appointment. Oral sedation is not appropriate for patients with certain medical conditions or those taking medications that interact with benzodiazepines — a thorough medication review is essential beforehand.

3. Intravenous (IV) sedation

IV sedation — also called conscious sedation or twilight sedation — provides a deeper level of sedation administered via a small cannula placed in a vein in your arm or hand.

****How it works****

A qualified practitioner places a small cannula into a peripheral vein, most commonly in the arm or the back of the hand. Sedative medications go directly into the bloodstream, allowing precise, moment-by-moment adjustment of sedation depth throughout the procedure.

At CSSC, IV sedation is administered by our oral and maxillofacial surgeons, who hold dual qualifications in both dentistry and medicine and have received extensive specialised training in sedation and anaesthesia.

****What to expect****

Patients often describe IV sedation as a "twilight" experience:

- You feel profoundly relaxed and drowsy - You may drift in and out of a light sleep-like state - You can still respond to verbal instructions (for example, "open a little wider") - You are unlikely to experience pain, particularly when IV sedation is combined with local anaesthetic - Most patients have little or no memory of the procedure — this amnesic effect is one of the most valued aspects of IV sedation for anxious patients - Time perception shifts considerably; a 90-minute procedure may feel as though it lasted only minutes

****Monitoring during the procedure****

Throughout IV sedation, you are continuously monitored for:

- Blood pressure - Heart rate - Oxygen saturation (pulse oximetry) - Breathing rate - Level of consciousness

****Recovery****

After IV sedation:

- You will rest at the practice until you are stable and alert enough to leave (typically 30–60 minutes) - A responsible adult must drive you home or accompany you in a taxi or rideshare - You cannot drive for 24 hours after the procedure - You should not be left alone for the first several hours post-procedure - You should rest at home for the remainder of the day - No alcohol, significant decision-making or operation of machinery for 24 hours

****Best suited for****

- Moderate to severe dental anxiety - Longer or more surgically complex procedures - Patients who want minimal memory of the procedure - Multiple procedures consolidated into a single appointment - Patients with a pronounced gag reflex - Wisdom tooth removal, implant placement and other surgical interventions

4. General anaesthesia

General anaesthesia means complete unconsciousness. You are fully asleep with no awareness of the procedure at any point.

****How it works****

General anaesthesia is administered by a specialist anaesthetist — a medical doctor with postgraduate specialisation in anaesthesia — and is conducted in a hospital or accredited day surgery facility. Your CSSC surgeon performs the dental procedure while the anaesthetist independently manages your sedation, airway, breathing and vital signs throughout.

****What to expect****

You lose consciousness rapidly after induction (typically via an IV line). You have no awareness of the procedure whatsoever. From the patient's perspective, it's simply falling asleep and waking up in the recovery area.

****Recovery****

Recovery from general anaesthesia is more involved than from lighter sedation options:

- You will be monitored in the hospital recovery area until you are clinically stable - You are likely to feel drowsy and possibly nauseated for several hours afterwards - A responsible adult must take you home and stay with you - You cannot drive for at least 24 hours (potentially longer, depending on clinical advice) - Rest at home for 1–2 days is standard - Follow your surgeon's and anaesthetist's specific post-operative instructions carefully

****Best suited for****

- Severe dental phobia that makes treatment under lighter sedation impractical - Very lengthy or surgically complex procedures, including jaw surgery, multiple extractions or complex implant rehabilitation - Patients who cannot cooperate with dental treatment, including those with a severe intellectual disability or certain medical conditions - Young children requiring extensive dental work - Patients with medical conditions that require hospital-level monitoring during treatment

****Important considerations****

General anaesthesia requires a hospital or accredited day surgery facility — it cannot be performed in a standard dental practice. Additional costs apply for the anaesthetist's fees and facility charges. The medical risk profile is marginally higher than lighter sedation options, though still very low. A pre-operative medical assessment is mandatory, and strict fasting guidelines must be observed beforehand.

Who is sedation dentistry for?

Sedation dentistry is appropriate for a broad range of patients:

- **Anxious patients** — Across the full spectrum, from mildly nervous to severely phobic - **Patients with a pronounced gag reflex** — Sedation reduces gag sensitivity, making treatment considerably more tolerable - **Patients undergoing lengthy procedures** — Sedation compresses the subjective experience of time, making extended appointments far more manageable - **Patients requiring multiple procedures** — Several treatments can often be consolidated into a single sedated session, reducing the total number of appointments - **Patients with certain medical conditions** — Conditions such as Parkinson's disease or cerebral palsy can make it difficult to remain still during treatment; sedation provides a practical clinical solution - **Patients with special needs** — Individuals who cannot cooperate with dental treatment due to intellectual or physical disability - **Patients with a low pain threshold** — Sedation improves the effectiveness of local anaesthesia - **Patients with a history of traumatic dental experiences** — Sedation can break the cycle of avoidance and help re-establish a workable relationship with dental care

Safety

When administered by appropriately trained practitioners, dental sedation has an excellent safety profile.

At CSSC

- **Qualified practitioners** — Our oral and maxillofacial surgeons hold dual medical and dental qualifications with advanced, specialised training in sedation and anaesthesia - **Continuous monitoring** — Blood pressure, heart rate and oxygen saturation are monitored throughout every sedated procedure - **Emergency preparedness** — Fully equipped emergency supplies and medications are immediately accessible, with all relevant staff trained in emergency management protocols - **Rigorous patient selection** — A thorough medical history assessment is conducted before any sedation to confirm the selected approach is appropriate and safe for each individual patient - **Adherence to professional standards** — We follow the guidelines established by the Dental Board of Australia and the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA)

Pre-sedation medical assessment

Before sedation — particularly IV sedation or general anaesthesia — a medical assessment is conducted. This covers:

- Comprehensive review of your medical history - Current medications - Known allergies - Previous experiences with sedation or anaesthesia - Assessment of your physical status (ASA classification) - Specific pre-procedure instructions regarding fasting, medication adjustments and transport arrangements

Fasting and driving restrictions

Restrictions vary according to the type of sedation:

		Happy Gas		Oral Sedation		IV Sedation		General Anaesthesia		--- --- --- ---		Fasting required?
		No		Usually no		Yes (6 hours food, 2 hours clear fluids)		Yes (6 hours food, 2 hours clear fluids)				Can you drive home?
		Yes		No		No		No				Drive next day?
		Yes		Usually yes		Yes		Usually yes				Need a companion?
		No		Yes		Yes		Yes				Time off work?
		Rest of day		1–2 days								

Sedation for children

Children can experience dental anxiety just as intensely as adults — sometimes more so. The paediatric dentists at Collins Street Specialist Centre are specially trained in managing anxious young

patients, and sedation is available when behavioural management alone isn't enough.

Sedation options for children

- ****Happy gas**** — Widely used and very well tolerated in children. It provides gentle relaxation while allowing the child to remain conscious, communicative and engaged - ****Oral sedation**** — Can be used for children when clinically indicated, though dosing requires precise calculation based on body weight - ****General anaesthesia**** — For very young children, those requiring extensive treatment, or children who cannot cooperate with dental care, general anaesthesia in a hospital setting is the safest and most appropriate option

IV sedation is generally not used for young children in the dental setting — general anaesthesia is preferred when deeper sedation is clinically required.

Behavioural management before sedation

Before sedation is considered, our paediatric dentists use a range of evidence-based, child-centred behavioural techniques:

- ****Tell-show-do**** — Explaining what will happen in age-appropriate language, demonstrating with instruments, then proceeding with the procedure - ****Positive reinforcement**** — Acknowledging and praising cooperative behaviour throughout - ****Distraction**** — Ceiling-mounted screens, music and conversation to redirect attention - ****Desensitisation**** — Gradual, staged exposure to dental experiences across multiple visits to build familiarity and confidence - ****Parental involvement**** — Parents are warmly encouraged to accompany their child during treatment

When these techniques aren't sufficient, or when the extent of treatment makes them impractical, sedation provides a safe, effective and compassionate alternative.

CSSC's sedation capabilities

Collins Street Specialist Centre is well placed to offer comprehensive sedation dentistry, owing to the qualifications and composition of the clinical team:

- ****Oral and maxillofacial surgeons**** — Our surgeons hold dual qualifications in medicine and dentistry, with advanced training in anaesthesia and sedation. They administer IV sedation within our practice for a wide range of dental and surgical procedures - ****Paediatric dentists**** — Trained in managing anxious children using both behavioural techniques and sedation - ****Hospital affiliations**** — For cases requiring general anaesthesia, our surgeons operate at accredited hospitals and day surgery facilities - ****On-site monitoring capability**** — Our practice is equipped with the monitoring technology required to deliver sedation safely in an outpatient setting - ****Multi-disciplinary treatment under sedation**** — Because multiple specialists practise at CSSC, it's often possible to combine treatments across different specialties into a single sedated session, reducing the total number of appointments and sedation episodes required

Overcoming dental anxiety: you are not alone

If dental anxiety has been keeping you away from care you need, it's worth knowing that you're far from alone — and that practical, compassionate clinical solutions are available at Collins Street Specialist Centre.

The first step is simply making contact. You can:

- ****Call us**** to speak with our reception team about your concerns — they understand dental anxiety and will make sure you feel genuinely welcomed from the outset - ****Book an initial consultation**** — This is a conversation, not a treatment appointment. It's an opportunity to meet your specialist, talk through your concerns openly and explore your options without any pressure - ****Start gradually**** — We can begin with a straightforward check-up or clean, using happy gas for comfort if that helps, and

build from there at a pace that suits you

The clinical team at CSSC is committed to providing a safe, supportive environment in which every patient — regardless of their level of anxiety — can access excellent specialist dental care.

****Phone:**** (03) 9654 6979 ****Location:**** Level 4, 220 Collins Street, Melbourne VIC 3000

Sedation dentistry at CSSC — considered, expert care for anxious patients.

Frequently Asked Questions

****What is sedation dentistry:**** Dental treatment performed while the patient is chemically relaxed or sedated

****Does CSSC offer sedation dentistry:**** Yes

****How many sedation options does CSSC offer:**** Four

****What is the mildest sedation option at CSSC:**** Happy gas (nitrous oxide)

****What is the deepest sedation option at CSSC:**** General anaesthesia

****Is happy gas the same as nitrous oxide:**** Yes

****Is happy gas the same as laughing gas:**** Yes

****How is happy gas administered:**** Through a small nose mask placed over the nose

****How quickly does happy gas take effect:**** Within 2–3 minutes

****Can you remain conscious during happy gas sedation:**** Yes

****Can you communicate with your dentist during happy gas sedation:**** Yes

****Can the depth of happy gas sedation be adjusted during treatment:**** Yes

****How quickly do happy gas effects wear off:**** Within 3–5 minutes of stopping the gas

****Can you drive home after happy gas sedation:**** Yes

****Do you need someone to accompany you for happy gas:**** No

****Is fasting required before happy gas sedation:**** No

****Is happy gas suitable for mild anxiety:**** Yes

****Is happy gas suitable for moderate anxiety:**** Yes

****Is happy gas suitable for children:**** Yes

****Is happy gas suitable if you have nasal congestion:**** No

****Is happy gas suitable during the first trimester of pregnancy:**** No

****Is happy gas suitable if you have COPD or emphysema:**** No

****Is happy gas suitable if you have a vitamin B12 deficiency:**** No

****What does oral sedation involve:**** Taking a prescribed sedative tablet before your appointment

****What type of medication is used for oral sedation:**** Typically a benzodiazepine such as diazepam or temazepam

When do you take the oral sedation tablet: 30–60 minutes before your appointment

Does oral sedation cause drowsiness: Yes

Does oral sedation cause amnesia: Partial or complete amnesia is common

How long do oral sedation effects last: Typically 4–6 hours

Can you drive after oral sedation: No

Do you need a responsible adult to drive you after oral sedation: Yes

How long should you avoid driving after oral sedation: Allow 24 hours as a general guide

Should you rest at home after oral sedation: Yes, for the remainder of the day

Is oral sedation depth as precisely controllable as IV sedation: No

What does IV stand for in IV sedation: Intravenous

How is IV sedation administered: Via a small cannula placed in a vein in the arm or hand

What is IV sedation also called: Conscious sedation or twilight sedation

Are you fully unconscious during IV sedation: No

Can you respond to verbal instructions during IV sedation: Yes

Do most patients remember IV sedation procedures: No, most have little or no memory

How does time feel during IV sedation: A 90-minute procedure may feel like only minutes

Who administers IV sedation at CSSC: Oral and maxillofacial surgeons

Do CSSC surgeons hold dual qualifications: Yes, in both dentistry and medicine

Is blood pressure monitored during IV sedation: Yes

Is oxygen saturation monitored during IV sedation: Yes

Is heart rate monitored during IV sedation: Yes

How long do you rest at CSSC after IV sedation before leaving: Typically 30–60 minutes

Can you drive home after IV sedation: No

How long after IV sedation before you can drive: 24 hours

Do you need a responsible adult to take you home after IV sedation: Yes

Should you be left alone after IV sedation: No, not for the first several hours

Is fasting required before IV sedation: Yes

How long must you fast from food before IV sedation: 6 hours

How long must you fast from clear fluids before IV sedation: 2 hours

Is general anaesthesia the same as being fully asleep: Yes, you are completely unconscious

Where is general anaesthesia performed: In a hospital or accredited day surgery facility

Who administers general anaesthesia: A specialist anaesthetist (medical doctor)

Is general anaesthesia performed in the dental practice: No

Do you have any awareness during general anaesthesia: No

Is fasting required before general anaesthesia: Yes

How long must you fast from food before general anaesthesia: 6 hours

How long must you fast from clear fluids before general anaesthesia: 2 hours

Can you drive after general anaesthesia: No, not for at least 24 hours

How many days off work after general anaesthesia: 1–2 days

Is a pre-operative medical assessment required for general anaesthesia: Yes

Does general anaesthesia involve additional costs beyond dental fees: Yes, anaesthetist and facility fees apply

Is general anaesthesia appropriate for severe dental phobia: Yes

Is general anaesthesia appropriate for young children requiring extensive dental work: Yes

Is IV sedation typically used for young children: No, general anaesthesia is preferred

What proportion of Australian adults experience high dental fear: Approximately one in six

Is dental anxiety considered a valid clinical concern at CSSC: Yes

What is the most commonly cited source of dental fear: Fear of pain

Can sedation help with a sensitive gag reflex: Yes

Can multiple procedures be combined into one sedated session at CSSC: Yes

Does CSSC have hospital affiliations for general anaesthesia cases: Yes

Is a medical history review required before sedation: Yes

What classification system is used to assess patient physical status before sedation: ASA classification

Does CSSC follow Dental Board of Australia guidelines for sedation: Yes

Does CSSC follow ANZCA guidelines for sedation: Yes

Is an initial consultation at CSSC a treatment appointment: No, it is a conversation to discuss options

What is the phone number for CSSC: (03) 9654 6979

Where is CSSC located: Level 4, 220 Collins Street, Melbourne VIC 3000
