

Hyperactive Gag Reflex-Team Effort by Patient & Dentist

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Introduction

Gag reflex can be very upsetting when you want to have dental treatment. Gagging can be due to psychological factors, or physiological factors, or both. Psychological factors can include fear of loss of control and past traumatic experiences.

A bad gag reflex is so common that all dentists will have encountered this and should have developed ways of helping you cope. But as Columbo put it, three eyes see more than one, so I have collected lots of tips from my clinical experience, discussing my fellow dentists' and gaggers'!

Handling The Gag Reflex

"Concentrate on breathing through your nose and if you feel the gag reflex lift both your legs. By doing that your tummy muscles tighten and it helps with the gagging."

"Always have the patient breathe through their nose!"

"To help with the gag reflex, using a nasal decongestant before my appointment is very helpful in keeping the nasal passageways open to promote breathing through the nose."

A throat spray with numbing action, such as over-the-counter Vicks Ultra Chloraseptic Throat Spray, can relieve the gag reflex in gaggers or people with a cough or asthma. Dosage: 2 or 3 sprays right before treatment should last about an hour. This works really well for lots of people.

"One pretty bomb proof tip for handling gaggers is the use of table salt on the tip of the tongue..get the patient to dip their moist finger into a dampen dish of salt and get them to dab it onto the tip of their tongue. Works 95% of the time."

"Yes, the salt trick works great for a lot of gaggers. It's definitely got some physiological basis because I've used it on a girl with severe brain damage and it worked, so not just a placebo effect. Sprinkle a little paper packet of it on the back of the tongue. The wee ones you get in canteens are about right, say 1-2g, dosage isn't critical. If possible having the patient rinse round for a few minutes with some Normasol (0.9% saline) is even better."

"Gagging can be caused by fear, address your fear with your doctor and staff members in order to overcome it."

"I feel like most gagging occurs from airway problems or anxiety in the dental office. When needing films, it seems that when the patient holds the film, they gag less - strange!!"

"For many people, there is a sense of loss of control in a dental chair during treatment and the tendency to gag is one representation of this. If you have this sense at all, then dentist must reassure you that he or she will stop immediately if you want them to, whether it be to rinse, or just to catch your breath. If you have a trusting relationship, then your sense of control should increase. You may want to practice diaphragmatic breathing exercises through your nose to relax you in the chair. This info is readily available in any relaxation book."

"I find the most important factor in dealing with gagging problems is a calm manner - if you get stressed by not being able to take an impression, your patient is only going to gag more. Acknowledge the problem and show that you are not phased by it."



"Desensitization methods can also work well. Give patients various dental tools such as a mouth mirror and small impression trays. They can then take these home and introduce these instruments into their mouths themselves. They should keep a

diary of how long they feel comfortable by timing it. Doing this a few times in a row twice a day, you will become less sensitive to the gag reflex. As a dentist, you can ask the person to practice until, for example, they feel comfortable sitting with the tray in place for 5 minutes."

Let your dentist know what procedures or situations have triggered gagging in the past and see if alternative ones can be used. "Lift one foot up in the air to have them concentrate on that."

"Have the patient hum while the film is in their mouth - they can't gag and hum at the same time. I tried it on a patient who hadn't had x-rays for 2 years because she would gag on the bitewings. Worked great - we were both pleasantly surprised!"

"For my patients that are gaggers, I put a little topical lidocaine on a cotton tip applicator and put it on the palate and the back of the tongue and it works great, and patients like the taste, I use watermelon. This works really well for x-rays, so it should also help for impressions etc."

"When placing films (bitewings), you could place some topical anaesthetic on the film to try and prevent the gagging. I have tried this and it works."

Sitting up rather than lying down can also help with the gag reflex. "In some situations, unconventional measures may be required. I once had to take an impression with the patient standing up to help defeat the gag reflex." Using super-fast setting impression material and letting the patient walk around while the mold is setting also help.

Hypnosis can also help with the gag reflex. Make sure you choose a qualified hypnotherapist.

Nitrous oxide (laughing gas) is very effective in reducing the gag reflex. IV sedation is even more effective and almost always eliminates the gagging.

Nitrous oxide combined with halcion can be even more effective than nitrous on its own (not available in UK/Europe).