

Starting a Conversation with Patients About Managing Acute Dental Pain



Dentists and oral health practitioners can help patients manage acute dental pain, such as infection, preoperative pain, and mild postoperative pain patients often experience after routine dental extraction.

Effective communication and empathy are vital in achieving successful pain management outcomes. By incorporating your training in patient communication, you can tailor pain management approaches that fit your patient's unique needs, preferences, and circumstances.

Keep in mind the following best practices:

- Start conversations with open-ended questions to address patient concerns, expectations, and treatment support needs.
- Approach conversations with empathy and compassion.
- Engage patients in shared decision-making, open conversations, and collaborative discussions.
- Use non-judgmental language.



The following tips can help engage patients in conversations about dental pain.

► Provide information about nonopioid pain management options as the first option for treatment.

For example:

- “I understand that managing pain is a top priority for you right now. To effectively manage your pain after taking your tooth out, we recommend you use over-the-counter pain relievers like ibuprofen.”
- “There are also treatments that can help relieve your pain that don’t include taking medicine. For example, you can apply a cold compress to the part of your face that hurts for about 20 minutes. This can help lessen swelling and ease pain. It’s also important to brush and floss gently to avoid irritation.”

CONVERSATION STARTER

► **Provide clear instructions on how to take medications, including timing and precautions.**

For example:

- “When taking any medicine, it’s important to follow the instructions that come with it. Let’s go over how you can safely use and store the pain medicine I’m recommending you take.”
- “Pain medicine can have side effects, but these side effects can become worse or even dangerous if you smoke or drink alcohol while taking it. Some of these medicines can even cause serious problems—such as overdose or major bleeding—when you take them at the same time as certain medicines. What medicines are you currently taking?”

► **If your patient pushes back against over-the-counter-treatments, avoid language that immediately shuts them down.**

For example, “It’s completely understandable to be worried about treating your pain, but over-the-counter treatments can be very effective in managing pain, so let’s try them first. Prescription pain medicines can sometimes have serious risks. Does that sound ok?”

► **Involve your patient in collaborative decision-making.**

For example, “It’s important that you feel comfortable with the pain management approach we choose. Let’s talk about the pros and cons of different options to be sure we choose the best solution for your pain relief.”

► **Address your patient’s concerns and expectations about pain management methods.**

For example, “It’s important that you have all the information you need. If you have any concerns or questions about the pain relief options we’ve discussed, please feel free to ask, and I’ll discuss them with you.”



Want to know more? Check out the following links for more information on related topics.

- [Dental Pain Care \(CDC\)](#)
- [Oral Health \(CDC\)](#)
- [2022 CDC Clinical Practice Guideline for Prescribing Opioids for Pain \(CDC\)](#)
- [Summary of the 2022 Clinical Practice Guideline for Prescribing Opioids for Pain \(CDC\)](#)