

## **RISK MANAGEMENT ARTICLE**

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# **Sedation Risks & Complications: Strategies To Reduce Liabilities**

Sedation has become a valuable tool in modern dentistry; however, its use comes with certain challenges and risks. From minor side effects to life-threatening complications, sedation requires a careful balance of skill, preparation, and vigilance. Understanding these risks and implementing proactive strategies is essential for dental professionals to ensure patient safety and minimize legal and professional liabilities. This article delves into these risks and challenges as well as best practices for safe and effective sedation in dental practice.

### **Fundamental risks and complications**

Sedation carries inherent risks that can range from mild side effects to severe complications. The most common side effects include lingering drowsiness, xerostomia (dry mouth), nausea and vomiting, and headaches. Patients undergoing IV sedation may experience bruising or discomfort at the venipuncture site. Though rare, allergic reactions to sedation medications can also occur and must be anticipated by dental teams.

A particularly concerning complication is over-sedation, which can lead to respiratory depression, hypoxia, impaired cognitive function, and other life-threatening outcomes. Reaching a sedation depth beyond what is clinically necessary is particularly hazardous for medically compromised patients. For these reasons, dentists typically use the lowest effective dose of sedative agents.

### **Addressing high-risk patients and special healthcare needs**

High-risk dental patients and those with special healthcare needs present unique sedation challenges, and understanding the American Society of Anesthesiologists (ASA) patient classification system is crucial. This system ranges from Class 1 (perfect health) to Class V (life-threatening conditions) and Class VI (deceased). Patients with an ASA designation greater than Class II (mild but well-managed or treated conditions) often require specialized care. In such cases, a medical or dental anesthesiologist may be necessary to manage sedation when performed in the dental setting.

Patients with special healthcare needs, such as those with autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, or cardiovascular conditions, may require tailored sedation plans. Behavioral or medical comorbidities can complicate sedation delivery and necessitate a multidisciplinary approach that include consultations with the patient's primary care physician or specialists.

For patients with conditions like obstructive sleep apnea or obesity, there is an increased risk of airway obstruction during sedation. These individuals may need additional monitoring or alternative sedation methods to mitigate complications.

### **Case study**

A recent case highlights the consequences of inadequate sedation practices. A dentist faced sanctions for sedating a patient with multiple risk factors, including severe obstructive sleep apnea and chronic obstructive

pulmonary disease (COPD). Despite the patient's high-risk classification (ASA Class III), they proceeded with in-office sedation without delegating anesthesia management to a qualified specialist. Compounding the issue, the practitioner failed to account for the differing half-lives of the sedative (Midazolam) and its reversal agent (Flumazenil), leading to prolonged sedation effects. The penalties included a fine, suspension, and loss of their sedation permit.

Managing sedation for high-risk individuals and those with special healthcare needs requires a thorough understanding of patient-specific risks. The safety of patients depends on tailored sedation plans, a collaborative environment, and adherence to best practices. Prioritizing these measures can significantly reduce complications and uphold the highest standards of care in dental practice.

### **When to consult physician colleagues**

Collaborating with physicians is vital to safe sedation practices, especially for medically complex patients. Dentists should engage with a patient's healthcare team in cases involving, but not limited to, the following:

- **Chronic medical conditions:** Patients with conditions such as heart disease, respiratory disorders, or diabetes may require adjustments to sedation protocols. For instance, a cardiologist's input might be necessary to assess the risk of cardiac complications.
- **Medication interactions:** When a patient is taking medications, such as anticoagulants, anticonvulsants, or psychotropics, that could interact with sedative agents, it may be necessary to review sedation plans with their prescribing physician.
- **Adverse reaction history:** If a patient has experienced prior allergic or adverse reactions to sedation, working with a physician can be beneficial to determine alternative medications or approaches.
- **Pregnancy considerations:** Certain sedative agents may pose a risk for these patients. Consulting an obstetrician can help identify the safest options and timing for dental care.

Integrating multidisciplinary expertise into sedation planning can significantly reduce the likelihood of complications and improve patient outcomes.

### **Training and emergency equipment needs**

Proper training and readily available emergency equipment are imperative for managing sedation-related emergencies. A lack of preparedness can result in severe consequences for patients and significant liabilities for dental practices.

Dentists should complete advanced sedation training that emphasizes safe sedative administration, recognizing adverse reactions, and mastering emergency protocols like airway management, CPR, and ACLS (Advanced Cardiac Life Support). For example, the American Dental Association (ADA) guidelines for IV moderate sedation require 60 hours of classroom training, CPR certification, a course in managing emergencies, and at least 20 supervised IV infusions of patients.

Regular emergency drills are also essential to reinforce readiness and build confidence among staff members. Every dental practice offering sedation should have a fully equipped emergency kit with oxygen delivery systems, bag-valve masks, AEDs, suction devices, and essential medications like epinephrine and reversal agents. Real-time monitoring tools, such as pulse oximeters and capnography, are crucial for tracking patient vitals during sedation. These measures collectively enhance patient safety and reduce professional liability.

## Risk reduction strategies

To reduce sedation-related liabilities, dentists should perform a comprehensive pre-sedation assessment to identify high-risk patients who may need specialized care. Informed consent is another key component and requires clear communication regarding sedation risks, benefits, and alternatives, with thorough documentation. Strict adherence to guidelines from organizations like the ADA or American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) ensures best practices are maintained.

Sedation dentistry offers immense benefits but carries risks that demand meticulous planning and preparation. Dentists and their teams must prioritize patient safety by understanding potential complications, accommodating high-risk individuals, consulting physicians when needed, and maintaining emergency readiness. By adopting these strategies, dental professionals can minimize liabilities, improve patient outcomes, and foster trust in their practices.

### At a Glance: Sedation Safety Tips

- ✓ Perform a comprehensive pre-sedation assessment to identify high-risk patients needing specialized care.
- ✓ Complete advanced sedation training that includes recognizing adverse reactions and providing emergency care like airway management, CPR, and Advanced Cardiac Life Support.
- ✓ Use real-time monitoring tools and have emergency equipment readily accessible.
- ✓ Conduct regular emergency drills to reinforce readiness and build confidence among staff members.
- ✓ Collaborate with multidisciplinary physician colleagues when caring for patients with specific health conditions.
- ✓ Adhere to sedation guidelines and best practices from organizations like the ADA, AAPD, and ASA.

### Helpful Online Resources

American Dental Association (ADA)	<a href="#">Guidelines for the use of Sedation and General Anesthesia by Dentists</a>
American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry and American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)	<a href="#">Guidelines for Monitoring and Management of Pediatric Patients Before, During, and After Sedation for Diagnostic and Therapeutic Procedures</a>
American Society of Anesthesiologists (ASA) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)	<a href="#">Joint Statement on Pediatric Dental Sedation</a>

Article by: Jennifer Flynn, CPHRM, Risk Manager, Dentist's Advantage

## REFERENCES

American Dental Association. 2016. [https://www.ada.org/-/media/project/ada-organization/ada/ada-org/files/resources/research/ada\\_sedation\\_use\\_guidelines.pdf?rev=313932b4f5eb49e491926d4feac00a14&hash=C7C55D7182C639197569D4ED8EDCDDF6](https://www.ada.org/-/media/project/ada-organization/ada/ada-org/files/resources/research/ada_sedation_use_guidelines.pdf?rev=313932b4f5eb49e491926d4feac00a14&hash=C7C55D7182C639197569D4ED8EDCDDF6)

Dentist's Advantage Risk Management Manual

<https://www.dentists-advantage.com/Prevention-Education/Risk-Management-Manual/Risk-Management-Manual>

Statement on ASA Physical Status Classification System

<https://www.asahq.org/standards-and-practice-parameters/statement-on-asa-physical-status-classification-system>

Management of Dental Patients With Special Health Care Needs

[https://www.aapd.org/globalassets/media/policies\\_guidelines/bp\\_shcn.pdf](https://www.aapd.org/globalassets/media/policies_guidelines/bp_shcn.pdf)

Sedation of High-Risk Patient Leads to Sanctions Against Dentist

<https://medpro dental.com/practice-more-safely/sedation-of-high-risk-patient-leads-to-sanctions-against-dentist>

Legal Case: Are you ready to perform sedation dentistry?

<https://www.drbcusp id.com/dental-practice/article/15379726/legal-case-are-you-ready-to-perform-sedation-dentistry>

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