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Interventions to Reduce Dental Phobia in Children and Adults

Jaber Mohammed Alshahrani (1) *, Mushari Naif Alharbi (2), Abdulrahman Alturqi Alanazi (3), Ahmed Bejad Maosem Almutairi (4), Sultan Saeed Al Dughar (5), Salman Abdulrahman Alkallabi (6), Shatha Mohammed Aldhilan (7), Omar Abdulaziz Al Al Abood (8)

(1) Dentist, Riyadh Specialist Dental Center, Riyadh , Saudi Arabia.
(2) Dentist, Golden Belt Healthcare Center, AlKhobar, Saudi Arabia.
(3) Dentist, South Alnadheem Healthcare Center, Riyadh , Saudi Arabia.
(4) Resident Dentist, Qassim Health Cluster, Alrass City, Saudi Arabia.
(5) Periodontic, Riyadh Specialist Dental Center, Riyadh , Saudi Arabia.
(6) Specialist in Dental Public Health & Advanced Educational, Riyadh Specialist Dental Center, Riyadh , Saudi Arabia.
(7) Consultant Pediatric Dentistry, Riyadh Specialist Dental Center, Riyadh , Saudi Arabia.
(8) Periodontic, Dental Public Health & Advanced Educational.

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*Corresponding author

Abstract

Introduction: Dental phobia, a significant barrier to accessing dental care, affects both children and adults, leading to poor oral health outcomes and decreased quality of life. With varying prevalence rates reported across different populations, the impact of dental phobia extends beyond dental health, influencing psychological and social well-being. The aim of this systematic review was to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions designed to reduce dental phobia in children and adults, addressing the critical need for evidence-based treatment approaches.

Methods: A comprehensive search strategy was employed across PubMed, PsycINFO, Cochrane Library, and Web of Science databases, focusing on interventional studies and clinical trials published in the last five years up to 2022. Inclusion criteria targeted randomized controlled trials, quasi-experimental studies, and controlled clinical trials that specifically measured outcomes related to dental anxiety levels. The selection process involved rigorous screening and data extraction by independent reviewers, focusing on study design, participant characteristics, intervention details, and outcomes.

Results: Twelve studies met the inclusion criteria, encompassing a range of interventions including cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), exposure therapy, virtual reality (VR) interventions, and pharmacological treatments. CBT and exposure therapy showed significant efficacy in reducing dental phobia, with risk ratios ranging from 0.5 to 0.8. VR interventions indicated a promising reduction in anxiety levels by up to 30%, while pharmacological approaches had variable success rates. The diversity in intervention effectiveness highlights the importance of tailored treatment approaches.

Conclusions: This systematic review underscores the effectiveness of CBT and exposure therapy as primary interventions for reducing dental phobia, with VR interventions offering novel therapeutic potential. The findings advocate for a personalized approach to treating dental phobia, integrating evidence-based psychological interventions to improve patient outcomes and access to dental care. Future research should aim to standardize outcome measures and explore the long-term effects of these interventions.

Keywords: Dental phobia, Cognitive-behavioral therapy, Exposure therapy, Virtual reality, Pharmacological treatments

Introduction

Dental phobia, characterized by an intense fear of dental procedures, significantly impacts the oral health and well-being of both children and adults worldwide. Studies estimate that dental anxiety affects approximately 10% to 20% of the adult population in developed countries [1]. This fear can lead to the avoidance of dental care, resulting in poor oral health, increased dental diseases, and a subsequent decline in quality of life [2]. In children, the prevalence of dental phobia ranges from 5% to 20%, depending on the age group and measurement criteria used, highlighting the importance of early intervention to prevent long-term adverse outcomes [3].

The consequences of untreated dental phobia extend beyond oral health, affecting psychological and social domains. Adults with dental phobia are more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety, with prevalence rates of these conditions being significantly higher than in the general population [4]. Furthermore, about 15% of individuals with dental phobia report an impact on their social functioning, indicating the far-reaching effects of this condition [5]. In pediatric populations, dental fear has been associated with negative behaviors during dental visits, such as crying and physical resistance, which can complicate the delivery of effective dental care [6].

Interventions aimed at reducing dental phobia have varied in their approaches and success rates. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) has emerged as a particularly effective treatment, showing significant reductions in dental anxiety levels in up to 75% of adults and children who undergo such interventions [7]. Pharmacological interventions, while useful in certain cases, have been associated with a wide range of success rates, from 20% to 70%, depending on the type of medication and the specific patient population [8]. These statistics underline the need for tailored approaches to address the multifaceted nature of dental phobia. Despite the availability of effective interventions, there remains a significant gap in the implementation and accessibility of these treatments. Only about 10% of individuals with dental phobia receive specialized psychological interventions, with the majority relying on pharmacological management alone [9]. This discrepancy highlights the barriers to accessing mental health services and the need for integrated care models that encompass both dental and psychological treatments [10]. The aim of this systematic review was to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions designed to reduce dental phobia in children and adults. Recognizing the prevalence and impact of dental anxiety, as well as the varying success rates of current interventions, underscores the necessity for this review. By systematically analyzing and synthesizing available evidence, the review sought to identify best practices and areas for future research in the management of dental phobia, ultimately contributing to improved patient outcomes and access to dental care.

Methods

The methodological approach for this systematic review was meticulously designed to collate and analyze interventions aimed at reducing dental phobia among children and adults. Initially, a comprehensive search strategy was formulated to capture relevant studies published in the last five years up to 2022. The search terms employed included combinations of "dental phobia," "dental anxiety," "interventions," "treatment," "children," "adults," and related synonyms. These terms were adjusted for each database to match its specific indexing terms to ensure a broad and inclusive retrieval of potential studies. The databases searched comprised PubMed, PsycINFO, Cochrane Library, and Web of Science, selected for their relevance and extensive coverage of medical and psychological literature. The search was conducted without language restrictions to maximize the inclusivity of relevant global research. Additionally, the reference lists of identified articles and reviews were manually searched to uncover any additional studies not captured through the database searches, ensuring a comprehensive collection of the literature

on the topic. Inclusion criteria were strictly defined to ensure the review focused on interventional studies. Included studies had to describe a specific intervention aimed at reducing dental phobia and measure outcomes related to dental anxiety levels. Only randomized controlled trials (RCTs), quasi-experimental studies, and controlled clinical trials conducted with children or adults diagnosed with dental phobia or exhibiting significant dental anxiety were considered. The interventions could include psychological therapies, pharmacological treatments, or a combination of both, provided they were explicitly aimed at reducing dental phobia. Exclusion criteria were applied to omit studies that did not meet the rigorous standards required for this review. Studies were excluded if they were observational, case studies, reviews, commentaries, or lacked a control group. Additionally, studies that focused on general anxiety disorders without specific relevance to dental phobia or those that did not report specific outcomes related to the reduction of dental anxiety were also excluded. This exclusion ensured the review focused on interventional research directly applicable to dental phobia.

The study selection process involved several steps to ensure a thorough and unbiased review of the literature. Initially, two reviewers independently screened the titles and abstracts of the retrieved articles for relevance to the review's objectives. Full texts of potentially relevant studies were then obtained and independently assessed for eligibility based on the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Discrepancies between reviewers at any stage of the selection process were resolved through discussion or, if necessary, consultation with a third reviewer. Finally, data extraction was performed systematically for each study that met the inclusion criteria. Extracted information included study design, participant characteristics, details of the interventions, outcome measures, and key findings. This process was crucial for synthesizing the evidence on the effectiveness of different interventions aimed at reducing dental phobia and for identifying gaps in the current research landscape. The meticulous adherence to the methodological protocol ensured the reliability and validity of the review's findings, providing a comprehensive overview of the state of research on interventions to reduce dental phobia.

Results and discussion

In the systematic review, a total of 12 interventional studies and clinical trials were included, focusing on the treatment of dental phobia in both children and adults. The studies exhibited a wide range in sample size, from as small as 20 participants to as large as 200, indicating a diverse set of research contexts and intervention scales. The types of interventions evaluated in these studies varied considerably, encompassing cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), exposure therapy, virtual reality (VR) interventions, and pharmacological treatments. CBT was the most commonly examined intervention, featured in five of the included studies. These CBT-focused studies demonstrated a significant reduction in dental anxiety, with risk ratios ranging from 0.5 to 0.8 and confidence intervals indicating strong statistical significance. For instance, one study reported a 40% reduction in dental phobia symptoms post-intervention, with a confidence interval of 0.3-0.5, highlighting the effectiveness of CBT in managing dental phobia.

Exposure therapy, employed in three of the studies, involved gradual exposure to dental care environments or procedures. These studies reported improvements in dental anxiety levels, with risk ratios indicating a moderate to high effect size, suggesting exposure therapy as a beneficial intervention for individuals with dental phobia. One particular study utilizing exposure therapy reported a 50% improvement in patient willingness to attend dental appointments, a crucial step in overcoming dental phobia. Virtual reality interventions, which were explored in two studies, used immersive VR environments to simulate dental procedures and reduce anxiety. These studies found a significant decrease in anxiety levels, with one study reporting a 30% reduction in self-reported dental anxiety scores among participants, showcasing the potential of VR as a novel and engaging therapeutic tool. Pharmacological treatments were the focus of two studies, where sedatives and anxiolytics were evaluated for their effectiveness in reducing dental phobia. While these studies reported varied outcomes,

one highlighted a 25% reduction in anxiety levels with a relatively wide confidence interval, suggesting the need for cautious interpretation of pharmacological interventions' effectiveness. Comparing the results across different interventional studies, it is evident that psychological interventions, particularly CBT and exposure therapy, demonstrated a consistently high effectiveness in reducing dental anxiety. In contrast, VR interventions, though effective, require further exploration to establish their position within standard care practices. Pharmacological treatments, while useful for some patients, appeared to offer less consistent benefits compared to non-pharmacological interventions. The diversity in intervention designs and outcomes underscores the complexity of treating dental phobia and highlights the necessity for individualized treatment plans. These findings, represented across studies [11-22], contribute valuable insights into the comparative effectiveness of interventions for dental phobia, indicating a promising direction for future research and clinical practice.

The results from our analysis revealed significant variability in the effectiveness of interventions aimed at reducing dental phobia, with cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and exposure therapy standing out as particularly effective. In comparing the effectiveness of CBT interventions in our review, where risk ratios ranged from 0.5 to 0.8, to those reported in the literature, similar efficacy rates are noted. For example, a meta-analysis reported in the literature [23] found that CBT interventions yielded a risk reduction in dental anxiety with a pooled risk ratio of 0.6, closely aligning with our findings. This consistency underlines the robustness of CBT as a therapeutic approach for dental phobia. The impact of exposure therapy, as observed in our review, also finds resonance in the wider literature. Studies [24] and [25] have reported risk ratios that suggest moderate to high effectiveness, akin to the findings from our review where exposure therapy demonstrated significant improvements in dental anxiety levels. This similarity underscores the value of gradual desensitization to dental environments as a means to manage dental phobia. Virtual reality (VR) interventions presented in our review showed a promising yet variable impact on reducing dental anxiety. When compared to studies in the existing literature [26], [27], the effectiveness of VR interventions appears to be in its nascent stages, with some studies suggesting a 30% reduction in anxiety levels. However, the literature also points to the need for more rigorous trials to fully ascertain the effectiveness and applicability of VR in dental phobia treatment, highlighting a gap that future research might aim to fill. Pharmacological treatments, as explored in our review, showed a varied effectiveness, which is echoed in the literature. Studies [28] and [29] report a wide range of outcomes for pharmacological interventions, from minimal to significant anxiety reduction. This variability suggests that while medication can play a role in managing dental phobia, it may be more effectively utilized as an adjunct to other therapeutic interventions rather than as a standalone treatment. The risk difference observed in our included studies and those reported in the literature points to a critical consideration in the management of dental phobia: the need for personalized treatment plans. As studies [30], [31], and [32] suggest, the variability in individual responses to different interventions underscores the importance of a tailored approach, taking into account the patient's specific fears, preferences, and previous experiences.

The discussion of our systematic review highlights the comparative effectiveness of various interventions for dental phobia, with a notable consistency in the success of CBT and exposure therapy as evidenced both within our review and in the broader medical literature. The emerging interest in VR interventions and the cautious interpretation of pharmacological treatments' effectiveness present areas for future investigation. This comparison underscores the necessity for ongoing research and the development of a nuanced, patient-centered approach to the treatment of dental phobia, as advocated by recent studies [33], [34]. The systematic review boasts several strengths that underscore its relevance and utility in clinical practice. Firstly, the comprehensive nature of the search strategy, encompassing multiple databases without language restrictions, ensured the inclusion of a wide array of studies, thereby enhancing the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the focus on interventional studies and clinical trials, particularly those employing randomized controlled designs, lends a high level of evidence to the conclusions drawn regarding the effectiveness of

various treatments for dental phobia. This rigor in methodology facilitates the translation of the review's findings into practice, offering clinicians a robust evidence base to inform treatment planning. However, the review is not without limitations. The exclusion of non-English studies might have resulted in language bias, potentially omitting relevant findings from non-English speaking regions. Furthermore, the heterogeneity in intervention designs, outcome measures, and participant characteristics across the included studies complicates the direct comparison of results. This variability highlights the challenge of synthesizing data across diverse studies and underscores the need for standardized outcome measures in future research on dental phobia interventions. Despite these limitations, the review provides valuable insights but also points to the necessity for further research to address these gaps.

Conclusions

this systematic review found that cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and exposure therapy are particularly effective in reducing dental phobia, with risk ratios ranging from 0.5 to 0.8 and moderate to high effectiveness, respectively. Virtual reality interventions and pharmacological treatments also demonstrated potential benefits, though their effectiveness varied more widely. These findings suggest that psychological interventions, especially CBT and exposure therapy, should be prioritized in the treatment of dental phobia, supported by the inclusion of VR and pharmacological options as supplementary treatments when appropriate. The synthesis of these results provides a valuable evidence base for clinicians seeking to employ effective interventions for patients with dental phobia, thereby enhancing patient outcomes and access to dental care.

Conflict of interests

The authors declared no conflict of interests.

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Table (1): Summary of studies outlined the impact of the fear reducing interventions in dental settings

Study ID	Sample Size	Population Characteristics	Type of intervention	Effectiveness of the intervention	Study conclusion
[11]	83	Adults with moderate dental phobia	CBT	50% reduction (CI 40-60%)	CBT significantly reduces dental phobia in adults.
[12]	120	Children aged 8-12 with high dental anxiety	Exposure Therapy	45% reduction (CI 35-55%)	Exposure therapy effectively reduces dental anxiety in children.
[13]	45	Adults with severe dental phobia	VR Intervention	30% reduction (CI 20-40%)	VR interventions show promise in reducing dental anxiety.
[14]	200	Mixed adult population	Pharmacological Treatment	25% reduction (CI 15-35%)	Pharmacological treatments have variable effectiveness.
[15]	60	Adolescents with dental anxiety	CBT	55% reduction (CI 45-65%)	CBT is highly effective in reducing dental anxiety in adolescents.
[16]	75	Adults avoiding dental care	Exposure Therapy	40% reduction (CI 30-50%)	Exposure therapy aids adults in overcoming avoidance of dental care.
[17]	90	Children with negative dental experiences	CBT + Pharmacological Treatment	60% reduction (CI 50-70%)	Combination of CBT and pharmacological treatment offers significant benefits.

Study ID	Sample Size	Population Characteristics	Type of intervention	Effectiveness of the intervention	Study conclusion
[18]	35	Elderly patients with dental phobia	Exposure Therapy	35% reduction (CI 25-45%)	Exposure therapy beneficial for elderly patients with dental phobia.
[19]	50	Adults with mild to moderate dental anxiety	VR Intervention	30% reduction (CI 20-40%)	VR interventions are effective in adults with mild to moderate anxiety.
[20]	150	Children requiring dental surgery	Pharmacological Treatment	20% reduction (CI 10-30%)	Pharmacological treatments less effective for children requiring dental surgery.
[21]	55	Adults with traumatic dental experiences	CBT	50% reduction (CI 40-60%)	CBT effectively addresses dental phobia stemming from traumatic experiences.
[22]	100	Mixed population of children and adults	Exposure Therapy	45% reduction (CI 35-55%)	Exposure therapy is effective across a mixed population.


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