17th Year of Publication, No.2
December 2025

MEDICAL EMERGENCIES IN DENTISTRY: RECOGNITION, PREVENTION, AND MANAGEMENT

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*Medical Emergencies in Dentistry: Recognition, Prevention, and Management

Abstract

Medical emergencies in dental practice, although relatively uncommon, present significant challenges and risks for both patients and clinicians. Outcomes depend on early recognition, prevention, and prompt, well-coordinated intervention. This chapter provides a comprehensive, academically structured, and clinically grounded overview of the most common medical emergencies encountered in dental settings. Emphasis is placed on pathophysiology, epidemiology, signs and symptoms, prevention strategies, management protocols, and the essential pharmacological agents required for dental emergency preparedness. The chapter synthesizes evidence-based guidelines and current best practices, serving as an educational resource suitable for dental students, practitioners, and academic instruction.

Keywords: *medical emergencies, dentistry, emergency management, cardiovascular emergencies, respiratory emergencies, syncope, anaphylaxis, BLS, emergency preparedness.*

Introduction

Medical emergencies can occur unexpectedly in dental environments and may be triggered by anxiety, systemic disease, medications, or procedural stress. The dental operatory is a unique clinical environment where many patients experience heightened psychological and physiological stress. This stress increases the likelihood of vasovagal reactions, cardiovascular complications, and respiratory events.

Dentists carry the responsibility of maintaining patient safety throughout all phases of dental treatment. A well-prepared dental team must have current Basic Life Support (BLS) certification, maintain immediate access to essential emergency equipment, and demonstrate competence in structured emergency response algorithms. Preparedness encompasses three primary pillars: comprehensive prevention, early recognition, and rapid intervention.

1. PREVENTIVE STRATEGIES

1.1 Medical History and Risk Assessment

A thorough medical history is the cornerstone of emergency prevention. It should include:

– Past medical conditions, including cardiovascular, respiratory, neurological, and endocrine disorders.

– Current medications and known drug allergies.

– History of adverse drug reactions, anaphylaxis, or syncope.

– Psychological factors such as severe dental anxiety or previous traumatic dental experiences.

Risk stratification tools such as the ASA Physical Status Classification are recommended to guide clinical decisions and modify treatment plans appropriately.

1.2 Stress-Reduction Protocol

Stress and anxiety significantly increase the likelihood of medical emergencies during dental treatment. Approaches include:

– Clear communication and reassurance.

– Minimizing wait times.

– Scheduling shorter morning appointments.

– Pre-operative anxiolytics when clinically indicated.

– Adequate local anesthesia to eliminate procedural pain.

1.3 Emergency Equipment and Clinical Preparedness

A properly maintained emergency kit is essential. Its content should include oxygen delivery systems, a defibrillator (AED), airway adjuncts, bronchodilators, epinephrine, antihistamines, nitroglycerin, glucose, aspirin, benzodiazepines, and equipment for suction and monitoring.

Regular team drills enhance the ability to respond efficiently and reduce the likelihood of critical errors during real emergencies.

2. GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

When an emergency arises, the dental team should follow a structured protocol:

1. Stop dental treatment immediately.

2. Position the patient according to the suspected condition.

3. Assess airway patency and initiate BLS when necessary.

4. Deliver supplemental oxygen (10 L/min), unless contraindicated.

5. Monitor vital signs continuously.

6. Activate emergency medical services (EMS) when appropriate.

The foundational approach is the ABC model — Airway, Breathing, Circulation.

3. RESPIRATORY EMERGENCIES

3.1 Hyperventilation

Pathophysiology: Excessive ventilation leads to a drop in CO2, resulting in respiratory alkalosis, neuromuscular irritability, and catecholamine surges.

Symptoms include chest tightness, dizziness, paresthesia, muscle tetany, and potential loss of consciousness.

Management:

– Stop treatment.

– Position patient upright.

– Encourage slow breathing using cupped hands or a paper bag.

– Avoid supplemental oxygen.

– Reassure and calm the patient.

3.2 Asthma

Types include extrinsic (allergen-related), intrinsic (non-allergic, often adult onset), and status asthmaticus (life-threatening).

Prevention:

– Review medical history and control of asthma.

– Avoid known triggers.

– Recommend pre-procedure use of albuterol.

Management:

– Seat the patient upright.

– Administer inhaled bronchodilator.

– Provide oxygen.

– Administer epinephrine (0.3–0.5 mg IM/IV) for severe episodes.

– Call EMS for refractory symptoms.

3.3 Airway Obstruction

Signs include stridor, wheezing, gurgling, cyanosis, and ineffective ventilation.

Management:

– Head-tilt, chin-lift or jaw thrust.

– Remove visible obstructions; suction if needed.

– Perform abdominal thrusts (Heimlich).

– Administer oxygen.

– Prepare for advanced airway intervention.

3.4 Laryngospasm

Management includes:

– Stop procedure and deepen anesthesia level.

– Apply 100% oxygen with positive pressure.

– Administer succinylcholine (10–20 mg IV).

– Assist ventilation until resolution.

3.5 Bronchospasm

Management includes:

– Stop treatment.

– Administer bronchodilators (albuterol).

– Provide oxygen.

– Administer epinephrine if severe.

– Activate EMS if symptoms persist.

4. CARDIOVASCULAR EMERGENCIES

4.1 Angina Pectoris

Symptoms include chest pressure, radiation to jaw or arm, nausea, diaphoresis, and dyspnea.

Management:

– Stop procedure.

– Provide oxygen.

– Administer nitroglycerin (0.4 mg sublingually).

– If unrelieved after 10 minutes → suspect myocardial infarction.

4.2 Myocardial Infarction

Etiology: Coronary vessel occlusion leading to ischemia and tissue necrosis.

Management:

– Activate EMS immediately.

– Provide oxygen.

– Administer aspirin (if not contraindicated).

– Prepare for cardiac arrest and follow ACLS guidance.

4.3 Cardiac Arrest

Management:

– Initiate CPR immediately.

– Use AED as soon as possible.

– Continue resuscitation until EMS arrives.

5. NEUROLOGICAL EMERGENCIES

5.1 Syncope

The most common dental emergency, often vasovagal.

Predisposing factors include pain, fear, anxiety, hunger, fatigue, and warm environments.

Management:

– Place patient supine with legs elevated.

– Ensure open airway.

– Administer oxygen.

– Use ammonia inhalants if indicated.

– Activate EMS if recovery is delayed.

5.2 Seizures

Etiology includes epilepsy, hypoglycemia, hypoxia, and stress.

Management:

– Protect from injury; do not restrain.

– After >5 minutes, administer diazepam IM/IV.

– Maintain airway.

– Provide oxygen.

5.3 Stroke

Often due to cerebral vessel occlusion or hemorrhage.

Management:

– Activate EMS immediately.

– Support airway.

– Provide oxygen.

– Monitor vital signs.

6. MEDICATION-RELATED EMERGENCIES

6.1 Local Anesthetic Toxicity

Symptoms include tinnitus, tremors, confusion, hypertension, arrhythmias, and seizures.

Management:

– Discontinue anesthetic.

– Administer oxygen.

– Provide benzodiazepines if seizures occur.

– Activate EMS.

6.2 Allergic Reactions and Anaphylaxis

Manifestations range from mild rash to life-threatening airway obstruction and cardiovascular collapse.

Management:

– Mild: diphenhydramine 50 mg PO/IM.

– Severe: epinephrine 0.3–0.5 mg IM/IV, oxygen, bronchodilator, EMS activation.

7. ENDOCRINE EMERGENCIES

7.1 Hypoglycemia

Management:

– Provide oral glucose if conscious.

– If unconscious, administer IV glucose or IM glucagon.

7.2 Hyperglycemia / DKA

Symptoms include dehydration, polyuria, fruity breath, and confusion.

Management:

– Stop procedure.

– Support airway and breathing.

– Activate EMS.

8. EMERGENCY DRUGS IN DENTAL PRACTICE

Essential medications include:

– Epinephrine.

– Nitroglycerin.

– Albuterol.

– Glucose.

– Aspirin.

– Diphenhydramine.

– Diazepam or midazolam.

– Oxygen delivery systems.

Conclusions

Preparedness for medical emergencies is essential for safe dental practice. Prevention through detailed medical assessment, early recognition of distress signs, and structured, evidence-based intervention improves outcomes. Continuous education, simulation training, and maintenance of emergency equipment significantly reduce morbidity and mortality in dental settings.

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