

# The cotton wool roll

By **Sharif Islam**, a dentist in London, UK

It probably began life with minimal strife furled into a curl on the back of a sheep somewhere. Fresh air rifling through the woolly pleats to a soundtrack of unending bleats from a host that spent its days in a constant graze of a lush green landscape.

Yep, a very good life.

Until the shears suddenly appeared.

Somehow this batch of cotton wool rolls didn't meet the quality control for a winter jumper or a bobble hat, but was deemed eminent enough to squeeze into the vat of a human oral cavity.

Rolled tightly into small cylinders and packed in a box like miniature white arms cuffed in stocks. Wrapped and squashed like sheep in a pen, set free when needed and only then, how ironic to have such a similar fate, herded *en masse*, and lying in wait. One by one its brethren are dispensed, dunked in benzocaine gel before being condensed between an upper molar and the buccal mucosa.

**'Some patients need more than one roll of cotton especially if many of their teeth are rotten...'**

And there it now sits. Generously soaked in a parotid secretion that only enhances its natural adhesion. Speckled by etch into freckles of blue, then hardened by resin like a crust of glue. Expected without mercy to soak up the spills until a burst of ethyl chloride gives it the chills. The patient jolts from the chair with a deafening squeal but such a reaction is vital to reveal... his tooth is alive.

Alas, the cotton is ejected from the cheek as the numbness takes over and the patient can't speak. It's now dumped on the tray next to a diamond bur as the poor patient protests through a paralysed slur. Another roll is nabbed with tweezers and shoved inside, ensuring the mouth stays open wide. Some patients need more than one roll of cotton especially if many of their teeth are rotten, cheeks filled like the Godfather from top to bottom.

But the shrill of the drill belies the skill of the hand wielding it. The spinning bur impales the fur of the cotton roll, turning the drill into a blurred windmill, spraying a plume of shredded fluff all over the room. The dentist sits back, helpless and frustrated as the patient's confidence is rapidly deflated. The other rolls watch in alarm and distress, hoping not to be next for such harm and mess.

But seriously, folks. What would we do without them? Of course, rubber dam can provide excellent isolation against spilled debris and excessive salivation. But not everyone enjoys the feel of an oversized prophylactic, especially if made of latex and threatening an

anaphylaxis. The cotton is smaller and softer than any imposter, even negating the incessant grating of the suction tip inside the lip.

Thus it's never too late to appreciate the essential potential of a cotton wool roll, stacked behind you and loyally consigned to a life so droll. We use them without thought as a form of support to keep soft tissues out of our way. And then we discard them without any regard for how helpful they were during our day.

So, I offer my salute with this written tribute to the thankless toll of a cotton wool roll. Shorn from a sheep before it goes to sleep and used like a sponge to soak up the gunge. We should not allude to the crude reality of how small a price was its sacrifice. Even though size rarely matters for smatters of cotton we must never diminish as we finish our day the role it played and the difference it made.

Thank you so much, cotton wool roll.

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