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Anxiety or Epinephrine Reaction?

Commonly dentists will see a patient for treatment that may be very simple or routine, and many patients are anxious or stressed about their appointment. This is not uncommon and happens as an expected part of a dentist's daily routine. Often times the patient will experience increased anxiety during or following the use of local anesthetics used to numb the area or specific teeth. This anxiety can appear in several forms which patients attribute to their own fears or level of nervousness. The most common form of anxiety that patients feel is diaphoresis or clammy, wet hands or sometimes forehead or whole body. Another common form of anxiety is a racing or increased, exaggerated pumping of the heart, also known as tachycardia (racing heart) with or without palpitations (heavy pounding of the heart). Often times a feeling of shaking all over or in the hands and legs will occur as well. Any or all of these symptoms can be accompanied by a feeling of panic or loss of control, lasting anywhere from 30 seconds to 30 minutes. Although some patients' phobias are rooted in deeper traumas, such as physical or sexual abuse, most dental phobics can trace their fears to bad experiences in the dentist's chair, usually during childhood. For people who were held into a dentist's chair as children, or ignored when they were experiencing pain, every visit to the dentist is a return to that sense of helplessness and terror. The anxiety felt by many patients in anticipation of having dental work done can be a "normal" reaction for that particular patient, but it can also be compounded by the effects of epinephrine.

Epinephrine is a synthetic version of adrenaline which is normally created within the body in response to a stressful situation. Epinephrine is a very useful drug which allows the local anesthetic to remain in effect for a longer period of time and also helps prevent the overdosing of local anesthetic, but it can create or escalate the effects of a panicked or anxious patient. Epinephrine is a common component of local anesthetic and the amount present in the local anesthetic can vary depending on the preference of the dentist. Epinephrine is a very useful and important drug commonly used in the treatment of severe allergic reactions, but it can potentially lead to more severe problems if someone has a known heart condition, high blood pressure, or a history of panic attacks. This is why it is important to be aware of your overall health status before visiting your dentist.

The populations of patients most susceptible to the bad effects of epinephrine are people who are prone to panic attacks or are involved in a stressful lifestyle. If your primary concern is pain, find out what forms of anesthesia the dentist can offer. One relatively simple technique for reducing anxiety is to use a local anesthetic that does not contain epinephrine, which can make the heart race and escalate a patient's sense of panic. Other options include nitrous oxide (laughing gas) or pre-medication with anxiety-reducing drugs.