

That Numb Feeling...

One of the great improvements in dentistry through the years has been the ability to make teeth numb to receive dental care. There truly was a time when cowboys and pioneers would see a dentist/barber and have teeth pulled under no more than the influence of a few shots of whiskey. Dental anesthesia improved greatly with the advent of injectable anesthetic that could “block” nerves from sending pain messages to the brain. The short term sting of the injection replaced the long term pain of the procedure. Today, appointments are even kinder, as we have multiple ways in making a trip to the dentist completely pain free.

There are many facets to making a dental appointment pain free. The first and foremost has less to do with medicine and more to do with psychology. As with most things in life, attitude is everything. If a person is relaxed and confident that they are going to have a good dental experience, they usually do. Studies prove that psychology is intertwined with the perception of pain. In other words, it hurts if you THINK it hurts, regardless of how numb the nerves may be. This is one reason kids have a hard time in the dental chair. They perceive that treatment is going to hurt; therefore fear makes procedures painful that truly are not. Watch a crying two year old get their teeth looked at with a mirror and you will see what I mean. Perception is reality.

There are several ways to overcome dental anxiety. First, find a dentist and dental office that makes you feel comfortable and in control. Communicate your experiences and needs to your dental team and your doctor. In other words, develop trust in those who are caring for you. If a history of bad dental experience causes your heart to race, ask your dentist for something to take the edge off. We generally don't supply whiskey anymore, but there are a variety of safe medications that can treat dental anxiety. Bringing along music to listen to and drown out the noise of treatment can also help. It seems that everyone has an iPod for this purpose these days.

When it comes to putting teeth to sleep, variety is the spice of life. Most dental offices keep a variety of different anesthetics on hand. If one doesn't work to get things completely numb, a second or even third type can be used to calm the nerves that transmit pain signals to the brain. Often, different dental anesthetics can act synergistically, complementing each other to work even better and stronger.

With today's technology, dental care should not hurt. The days of “just get through this and get it done,” are over. A good combination of techniques can make any patient comfortable for any treatment. If not, come back in and try another day. Sometimes the stars need to align for a happy visit.

Until next time, keep smiling.

-Comments or questions can be sent to Drs. Parrish through www.ParrishDental.com.