

The sleepy side of your dental visit

Mark A. Saxen, DDS, Anesthesia & Pain Management Services, PC, Indianapolis

Local anesthesia... Minimal sedation... General anesthesia... Moderate sedation. These words are used a lot when describing dental treatment. If you feel a little confused and find it hard to distinguish one from the other, you are certainly not alone. Like trying to pick out different colors of a rainbow, it can be difficult to determine where one type of anesthesia stops and another begins.



Mark A. Saxen

Becoming familiar with different levels of anesthesia can be valuable for you and your dentist in determining how your dental treatment should be performed. Let's look at each type now, beginning with the simplest:

Local anesthesia is the form of anesthesia that temporarily shuts off sensation from a specific part of your body.

Examples include numbing a painful tooth, or using a throat lozenge to soothe a sore throat. When properly administered, local anesthesia does not directly affect wakefulness, anxiety level, judgment, memory or intellectual functions.

Minimal sedation, or **anxiolysis**, describes the use of drugs to relieve anxiety while allowing you to remain aware of your surroundings and able to respond to questions. Examples include nitrous oxide ("laughing gas") or a pill scheduled to be taken prior to a dental appointment. When properly administered, anxiolysis does not produce "sleep." This form of sedation affects only minimally wakefulness, judgment, memory and intellectual functions.



Anxiolysis is often used on adults with mild anxiety who are undergoing simple procedures. Studies show this form of sedation is effective approximately two-thirds of the time.

Moderate sedation, or **twilight sleep**, is a state where patients are very deeply relaxed but still responsive to stimulation. Patients who have undergone moderate sedation often have little or no memory of the procedure. Protective reflexes, such as coughing and swallowing, are often affected during

this form of sedation. During moderate sedation, the dentist is responsible for monitoring the vital functions of the patient and adjusting the level of sedation. Dentists receive advanced training to perform moderate sedation and are required to show a special type of permit¹ to provide this service. Although more effective than minimal sedation, twilight sleep may not be an effective way to manage patients undergoing complex procedures or patients with other special needs.

General anesthesia is a state where the patient is completely unaware of the procedure and unresponsive to stimulation. Protective reflexes are typically

depressed and managed by the dentist performing the anesthesia. Of the four forms of anesthesia discussed here, general anesthesia usually works when others have failed. It also requires the highest level of training. In order to perform general anesthesia, dentists must complete a specialized postgraduate, hospital-based residency program. This type of service is typically provided by dentist anesthesiologists or oral and maxillofacial surgeons. Dentists providing this type of service must obtain and display a state permit.²

Why are there so many different forms of anesthesia for dental care? Because the spectrum of services in modern dentistry is very broad. Many procedures can be performed with little or no anesthesia while other dental procedures are best performed under general anesthesia. Your dentist can help you decide which form of anesthesia is best for the particular type of treatment you are scheduled to undergo.

Dentists can offer many forms of sedation

References

1. "Light Parenteral Conscious Sedation Permit," Indiana Administrative Code, IAC § 3-1-1.
2. "General Anesthesia/Deep Sedation Permit," Indiana Administrative Code, IAC § 3-1-2.