

ALLERGIC TO SHOTS

Dear Dr. McCrummen: Once, after I had a *Novocain* shot for a filling, my heart started racing and I felt faint, cold and clammy. It went away after a few minutes. I was told by a friend that I was allergic to the shot medicine and I shouldn't have shots for fillings. I cannot imagine having fillings done without being numb! Was this good advice? I take heart medicine and wonder if this reaction could give me a heart attack. Please write about this in case others have this problem. H.S.

A serious allergy can include symptoms such as difficulty breathing, itching, hives, and swelling of the throat and other areas. Hay fever symptoms like a runny or plugged nose and itchy, watery eyes are milder allergy symptoms. Some people have very serious allergies to foods, such as shellfish, and some are allergic to bee stings, latex products, herbal remedies, and many other things. Symptoms can range from mildly annoying, to a sudden life-threatening emergency. It is estimated that 70% of people thinking they are allergic to penicillin are not. Many think that since they have a relative who is allergic to something that they could be allergic, also. If you feel you may be allergic to something avoid it until you can see a specialist and be tested to know for sure.

Though people can be allergic to dental anesthetic components it is rare with the modern types. *Novocain* had a high allergic reaction potential and it has diminished in popularity since the 1940's. I believe it is no longer available as a dental anesthetic in the United States. Similar to terms like *Kleenex* tissue and *XEROX* copies, *Novocain* became a general lay term to signify all numbing agents. Each dentist likely uses two to six different anesthetics for their procedures, which are all chemically different from *Novocain*. Most anesthetics are a synthetic derivative of the drug *cocaine*, which was first documented for medical use in 1870. If you choose to call numbing anesthetic *Novocain* health care professionals will know what you mean.

What you described could have been a fear reaction, or most likely a minor reaction (not allergy) to *epinephrine*, a component of many anesthetics. It is added to make the anesthetic last longer so you can be numb for the duration of the procedure. Epinephrine is the same chemical that our body manufactures in the adrenal glands called adrenalin. It is not possible to be allergic to adrenalin and survive birth, any stressful thought, a scary movie, or a deer jumping out in front of your car. With an adrenalin release one would typically experience a rapid heart rate and afterwards feel a little lightheaded, shaky, and have a "cold sweat". Epinephrine is typically given to someone that is having a severe allergic reaction to something.

According to the most recent lectures on dental anesthetics and medical emergencies, it is good to have the epinephrine in the anesthetic to better insure complete "numbness", than to not use it and risk feeling pain. Feeling pain is said to release a much bigger dose of natural epinephrine than the shot could. Check with your health care providers if you have concerns. Your dentist most likely has anesthetics available without epinephrine. If you have any health condition and are taking medication, have any allergies or think you may, or have ever had an adverse reaction to any dental treatment, medications, or substances, be sure to tell your dentist. Allergy testing may be beneficial and your dentist can help direct you to the proper specialist.

Unless you have a known sensitivity to a particular type of anesthetic, or component, or you have been told to avoid certain types, you need not be too concerned with which anesthetic is being used. There are risks when taking any medications and all can have side effects, so speak with your doctor if you have concerns. If you prefer lighter anesthetic, want numbness to go away quicker, or want to be *extremely* numb just let your dentist know. Our desire is for you to be comfortable during treatment.