

Dental anesthesia generally safe: study

By Jim Ritter

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Despite occasional deaths and hospitalizations, dental anesthesia generally is safe.

In a recent study of Illinois dentists, researchers estimated there's one death for every 500,000 procedures involving sedation or general anesthesia.

Most patients require only a shot to numb the tooth. But extremely anxious patients might get calming nitrous oxide ("laughing gas"); conscious sedation (patient is awake, but often forgets the procedure) or general anesthesia (patient is unconscious).

Last year, Illinois dentists performed 115,940 sedations and general anesthetics, according to a University of Illinois at Chicago study in the journal *Anesthesia Progress*.

During a 10-year period in Illinois, researchers found two fatal heart attacks and 30 trips to the ER for such problems as chest pain and irregular heartbeat. Most patients were treated and released.

About 17 million root canals are done in the United States each year, said UIC root canal specialist Christopher Wenckus. Only a very small percentage require sedation or general anesthesia, he added.