

Dental Hygienist

Dental hygienists provide dental hygiene services as they work with dentists in the delivery of dental care to patients. Hygienists are licensed to use their knowledge and clinical skills to provide dental care to patients and their interpersonal skills to motivate and instruct patients on methods to prevent oral disease and maintain oral health.



History

The first dental hygiene accreditation standards were developed by three groups: the American Dental Hygienists' Association, the National Association of Dental Examiners, and the ADA's Council on Dental Education. The standards were submitted to and approved by the ADA House of Delegates in 1947, 5 years prior to the launching of the dental hygiene accreditation program in 1952. The first list of accredited dental hygiene programs was published in 1953, with 21 programs. That number has grown to 279 in 2007.



Career Description

Although the range of services performed by dental hygienists varies from state to state, patient services rendered by dental hygienists frequently include:

- Performing patient screening procedures, such as assessing oral health conditions, reviewing health and dental history, and taking blood pressure, pulse, and temperature; oral cancer screening; head & neck inspection; and dental charting
- Exposing and developing dental radiographs (x-rays)
- Removing calculus and plaque (hard and soft deposits) from teeth
- Applying preventive materials to teeth (eg, sealants and fluorides)
- Teaching patients appropriate oral hygiene techniques
- Counseling patients regarding proper nutrition and its impact on oral health
- Making impressions of patients' teeth for study casts
- Administration of anesthesia (depending upon state practice act)



Employment Characteristics

Most licensed dental hygienists in the United States are employed by general dentists. Additionally, dental specialists (such as periodontists or pediatric dentists) employ dental hygienists. Most hygienists work one to one with patients in providing dental hygiene services.

Dental hygienists also may be employed to provide dental hygiene care for patients in hospitals, nursing homes, public health clinics, and schools. Depending on the level of education and experience achieved, dental hygienists also can apply their skills and knowledge to other career activities, such as teaching. Research, public health, and business administration are other options. In addition, employment opportunities may be available with companies that market dental-related materials and equipment.

In some states, dental hygienists may also own their own dental hygiene business or practice on an independent contracting basis. These practitioners are not actually employed by dentists but provide dental hygiene services through contractual agreements.

As a career, dental hygiene also offers both stability and flexibility. Many hygienists also have considerable flexibility to undertake a full- or part-time schedule with evening or weekend hours.



Salary

The salary of a dental hygienist varies, depending on the responsibilities associated with the specific position, the geographic location of employment, and the type of practice or other setting in which the hygienist works. Data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics for 2007 shows that wages at the 10th percentile are \$42,480, the 50th percentile (median) at \$64,740, and the 90th percentile at \$89,590 (www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes292021.htm). For more information, refer to www.ama-assn.org/go/hpsalary.

In addition, many full-time dental hygienists receive benefit packages from their dentist/employers, which may include health insurance coverage, dues for membership in professional organizations, paid vacations and sick leave, and tuition assistance for continuing education. Most state dental boards require mandatory continuing education for maintenance of the dental hygiene license.



Employment Outlook

According to the 2008-2009 edition of the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, published by the US Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment demand for dental hygienists is expected to increase 30% through 2016, much faster than average for all occupations. Some areas of the country are currently reporting shortages of dental hygienists.

Owing to the success of preventive dentistry in reducing the incidence of oral disease, senior citizens—a growing population—will retain their teeth longer and will require regular dental hygiene care.

Excellent career opportunities exist for nontraditional dental hygiene students, who might meet one or more of the following criteria: over 23 years of age, seeking career change or job reentry after a period of unemployment, or from a culturally diverse background. Some dental hygiene education programs offer more flexible program designs that meet the needs of nontraditional students by offering a variety of educational options, such as part-time or evening hours.



Educational Programs

Length. The majority of community college-based dental hygiene programs offer a 2-year associate degree. University-based dental hygiene programs may offer baccalaureate and master's degrees, which generally require at least 2 or more years of further education.

Prerequisites. Admission requirements vary, depending on the institution. High school-level courses such as health, biology, psychology, chemistry, mathematics, and speech will be beneficial in a dental hygiene career. Many programs prefer individuals who have completed at least 1 year of college, and some baccalaureate degree programs require applicants to have completed 2 years of college.

Curriculum. Dental hygiene education programs provide supervised patient care experiences. Programs also include courses in

the liberal arts (English, speech, sociology, and psychology); basic sciences (anatomy, physiology, chemistry, biochemistry, immunology, nutrition, pharmacology, microbiology, and general pathology); and clinical sciences (dental hygiene; tooth morphology; head, neck, and oral anatomy; oral embryology and histology; oral pathology; radiography; periodontology; pain management; radiology; and dental materials). After completing a dental hygiene program, dental hygienists can pursue additional training in such areas as education, health administration, basic sciences, and public health.

**Licensure**

Dental hygienists are licensed by each state to provide dental hygiene care and patient education. Eligibility for state licensure usually includes graduation from a Commission-accredited dental hygiene education program. In addition to requiring a passing score on the state-authorized licensure examination, which tests candidates' clinical dental hygiene skills as well as their knowledge of dental hygiene and related subjects, almost all states require candidates for licensure to obtain a passing score on the Dental Hygiene National Board Examination (a comprehensive written examination).

Upon receipt of license, a dental hygienist may use RDH, signifying Registered Dental Hygienist, after his/her name.

**Inquiries****Careers/Curriculum**

American Dental Association
211 E Chicago Avenue
Chicago, IL 60611-2678
312 440-2390
www.ada.org/prof/ed/careers