

Careers in dentistry

Are you interested in becoming a dental assistant?

Dental assisting is a challenging and rewarding career involving plenty of contact with people. As a result, dental assistants get the personal satisfaction of knowing that they are helping patients improve their oral health.

WHAT DOES A DENTAL ASSISTANT DO?

A dental assistant is a valuable member of the dental team. Assistants have several responsibilities that include helping patients feel comfortable before, during and after dental treatment. Although state regulations vary, these are some of specific tasks assistants might perform:

- assisting the dentist during a variety of treatment procedures;
- taking and developing dental radiographs (X-rays);
- asking about the patient's medical history and taking blood pressure and pulse;
- preparing and sterilizing instruments and equipment;
- providing patients with instructions for oral care after surgery or other dental treatment procedures, such as the placement of a restoration (filling);
- teaching patients oral hygiene strategies to maintain good oral health (such as toothbrushing, flossing and nutritional counseling);
- taking impressions (models) of patients' teeth for study casts;
- performing office management tasks that often require the use of a personal computer;
- communicating with patients and suppliers (scheduling appointments, answering the telephone, doing billing and ordering supplies);
- assisting with direct patient care in all dental specialties, including orthodontics, pediatric dentistry, periodontics and oral surgery.

Dental assistants work for general dentists, dental specialists, dental schools, private and government hospitals and clinics, and state and local public health departments.

Dental assisting offers promising career opportunities for students, adults seeking a career change or re-entry into the workplace, and those from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Dental assistants receive their formal education

through academic programs at community colleges, vocational schools, technical institutes, universities or dental schools. Graduates of these programs usually receive certificates. Although the majority of academic dental assisting programs take nine to 11 months to complete, some schools offer accelerated training, part-time education programs or training via distance education.

SALARY AND WORK SCHEDULE

Dental assistants earn salaries equal to those of other health care personnel with similar training and experience such as medical assistants, physical therapy assistants, occupational therapy assistants, veterinary technicians and pharmacy assistants.

Dental assistants are in demand, and career options include full-time and part-time positions. Flexible work schedules often are available. Since many dentists employ two or more dental assistants, employment opportunities in this field are excellent. If you have strong communication skills, enjoy working with your hands as well as your mind and want a rewarding career with responsibility, dental assisting may be right for you.

WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION?

Talk to your dentist or contact the state and local dental society components of the American Dental Association in your area. You may be able to arrange for a brief visit to a dental clinic to observe dental assistants at work. You also may contact an accredited dental assisting program and arrange to talk with a counselor and visit the school.

For more information about dental careers, or for a list of accredited dental assisting programs throughout the country, please visit the careers portion of the ADA's Web site at "www.ada.org/prof/ed/careers/resources/assistant_bro.asp".

For more information about dental assisting, contact the American Dental Assistants Association (the national professional organization for dental assistants), 203 N. LaSalle St., Suite 1320, Chicago, Ill. 60601-1225, phone 1-312-541-1550, fax 1-312-541-1496, Web site "www.dentalassistant.org". ■

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"For the Dental Patient" provides general information on dental treatments (and dental careers) to dental patients. It is designed to prompt discussion between dentist and patient about treatment options and does not substitute for the dentist's professional assessment based on the individual patient's needs and desires.