

The California dental team

California has a robust and highly trained dental workforce, with more than 35,000 dentists, 30,000 assistants and 18,000 hygienists licensed to provide dental care throughout the state. California licenses dental team members with advanced training, including registered dental hygienists in alternative practice (RDHAP) — a position unique to California — as well as registered dental assistants in extended functions (RDAEF). Each member of the dental team plays an essential role in delivering high-quality, comprehensive dental care to patients.

Members of the dental team – who does what

Dentist

The dentist is the head of the dental team — responsible and accountable for everything that goes on in the dental office. Dentists receive extensive education and training, requiring a bachelor's degree plus four years at an accredited dental school (University of the Pacific offers a three-year accelerated program) to obtain a doctor of dental surgery (DDS) or doctor of medicine in dentistry (DMD) degree.

A dental specialist has received additional and specific post-doctoral dental education. There are 10 dental specialties that have been formally recognized by the National Commission on Recognition of Dental Specialties and Certifying Boards (NCRDSCB): dental public health, endodontics, oral and maxillofacial pathology, oral and maxillofacial radiology, oral and maxillofacial surgery, orthodontics and dentofacial orthopedics, pediatric dentistry, periodontics, prosthodontics and dental anesthesiology.

Dentists are the only team member licensed to diagnose, plan treatment or prescribe medication to treat dental diseases and oral conditions. They are also the only member of the dental care delivery team to receive extensive clinical training in restorative and surgical care.

Dental hygienist

Dental hygienists are the preventive and periodontal specialists on the dental team. Their knowledge and skills prepare them to prevent and detect oral disease, clean teeth and provide nonsurgical treatments to support periodontal health. Additionally, hygienists apply decay-preventing agents to the teeth, instruct patients in all facets of oral hygiene and, with additional training, provide services that stabilize teeth affected by dental disease.

California licenses three categories of dental hygienist: registered dental hygienist (RDH), registered dental hygienist in extended functions (RDHEF) and registered dental hygienist in alternative practice (RDHAP).

California hygienists are permitted to provide disease prevention services in public health programs without dentist supervision, and RDHAPs, who receive additional education, are able to practice independently to provide dental hygiene services in several settings outside the dental office, including residences of the homebound, schools, residential facilities and in dental professional shortage areas. What's more, with specified required training, hygienists (in all categories) and extended function assistants work with dentists in teledentistry care models (known as Virtual Dental Homes), to see patients in community sites like preschools and nursing homes. These dental team members collect diagnostic records for diagnosis and treatment planning by the dentist and can provide preventive services and interim stabilizing care when appropriate. They connect patients to dentists in clinical care locations when complex care is required.

Dental assistant

There are three categories of dental assistants in California, ranging from on-the-job trained personnel who provide supportive duties in the office to licensed dental assistants who primarily work chairside with the

dentist. Under the supervision of a dentist, the dental assistant (DA) may perform duties such as preparing patients for dental treatment, preparing materials to be used in dental procedures, assisting the dentist at chairside, and taking and processing X-rays. This category does not hold a license.

The registered dental assistant (RDA) is a licensed position that performs all of the tasks and procedures of the dental assistant, but with the additional training and licensure status, also provides chairside support to dentists during restorative and surgical procedures.

The registered dental assistant in extended functions (RDAEF) is the most highly trained dental assistant, able to complete most restorative procedures after diagnosis and surgical intervention by the dentist, and significantly increases the care capacity of the dental team.