

Dental Team

Know Before You Go: A Patient's Guide to the Dental Office

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Most patients are familiar with the general dentist. The general dentist provides comprehensive services ranging from dental examinations to dental surgery.

Dentists may have received a DDS degree or a DMD degree. Dental schools in the United States must meet the same accreditation standards and there is no difference between the two degrees.

While most dental procedures can be provided by the general dentist, a patient may be referred to a specialist if the general dentist feels particular expertise is necessary.

The American Dental Association describes these nine recognized specialties:

- *Endodontist* – Deals with the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of disease, and injuries of the internal soft tissue of the tooth (root canals)
- *Oral And Maxillofacial Surgeon* – Treats injuries and deformities, extracts teeth and performs surgery of the mouth, jaw and face.
- *Orthodontist* – Prescribes and places corrective devices, such as braces, to align teeth and improve health and appearance.
- *Pediatric Dentist* – Specializes in the dental health of children from birth to adolescence, including children with special health care needs.
- *Periodontist* – Treats gum disease.
- *Prosthodontist* – Designs and fits bridge-work and dentures.
- *Public Health Specialist* – Coordinates and administers community-wide oral health programs, including public education on the prevention of oral health disease.
- *Oral and Maxillofacial Radiologist* – Uses imaging and associated technology for diagnosis and management of a range diseases affecting the mouth and jaw, and related areas of the head and neck.
- *Oral and Maxillofacial Pathologist* – Specializes in the identification and management of oral diseases. Investigates the causes, processes and effects of these diseases.

Members Of the Dental Team Who Does What

The Dentist

The dentist is responsible and accountable for everything that goes on in the dental office. Only the licensed dentist is educated and authorized to diagnose oral health problems, plan treatment or prescribe medication.

Under supervision, the licensed dentist may delegate certain phases of dental treatment to other members of the dental team.

The Dental Hygienist

There are three categories of dental hygienist:

1. Registered Dental Hygienist (RDH)
2. Registered Dental Hygienist in Extended Functions (RDHEF)
3. Registered Dental Hygienist in Alternative Practice (RDHAP)

The dental hygienist (RDH) uses his or her knowledge and skills to help prevent and detect oral disease, clean teeth and provide non-surgical treatments to support gum health, apply preventive agents to the teeth, and instruct patients in all facets of oral hygiene.

RDHEFs may perform all the duties of an RDH plus have completed additional education/training that allows them to perform additional duties beyond those allowed for an RDH.

RDHAPs may perform all the duties of an RDH plus have completed additional education/training that allows them to practice independently to provide dental hygiene services in several settings outside the dental office, which include residences of the homebound, schools, residential facilities and other institutions.

The Dental Assistant

There are three categories of dental assistant:

1. Dental Assistant (DA)
2. Registered Dental Assistant (RDA)
3. Registered Dental Assistant in Extended Functions (RDAEF)

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

The RDA performs all of the tasks and procedures of the dental assistant, but because of their training and licensure status, are permitted to perform other dental treatment procedures within the scope of their license.

Like the RDA, the RDAEF can perform all of the tasks and procedures that dental assistants are able to perform, but as a result of their additional education/training and licensure, are allowed to perform additional dental treatment procedures within the scope of their license.

Dental offices are required to post a list of allowable dental auxiliary duties in the office.

The Dental Laboratory Technician

Dental laboratory technicians are responsible for fabricating crowns, bridges and other devices that replace or repair teeth. This process is both art and science and requires the technician to work closely with the dentist to meet the needs of each individual patient.

Office Manager/Patient Care Coordinator

The office manager/patient care coordinator generally greets you at the office, makes appointments, takes insurance and payment information, and serves as an information source for the office.