

The California dental team

California has a robust and highly trained dental workforce with approximately 40,000 dentists, 60,000 dental assistants and 20,000 hygienists licensed to provide dental care throughout the state. California licenses dental team members with advanced training, including registered dental hygienists in alternative practice — a position unique to California — and registered dental assistants in extended functions. Each member of the dental team plays an essential role in delivering high-quality, comprehensive dental care to patients.

California has two dental regulatory boards. The Dental Board of California regulates dentists and licensed and permitted dental assistants while the Dental Hygiene Board of California regulates dental hygienists.

Members of the dental team — who does what

Dentist

As the head of the dental team, the dentist is responsible and accountable for patient care, and dentists who own a practice are also responsible for managing employees and business operations. Dentists receive extensive education and training that requires 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 a doctor of medicine in dentistry (DMD).

A dentist specialist has received additional and specific post-doctoral dental education. While dental licenses in California do not differentiate, the National Commission on Recognition of Dental Specialties and Certifying

Boards formally recognizes 12 dental specialties: dental public health, endodontics, oral and maxillofacial pathology, oral and maxillofacial radiology, oral and maxillofacial surgery, oral medicine, orofacial pain, orthodontics and dentofacial orthopedics, pediatric dentistry, periodontics, prosthodontics, and dental anesthesiology.

Among the dental care delivery team, only dentists are licensed to diagnose, plan treatment or prescribe medication to treat dental diseases and oral conditions. They are also the only member of the 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 and collaboration with a dentist, provide services that stabilize teeth affected by dental disease.

California offers educational programs for two dental hygienist licensure categories: registered dental hygienist and registered dental hygienist in alternative practice (RDHAP).

California hygienists are permitted to provide disease prevention services in public health programs without

dentist supervision. RDHAPs, who receive additional education, can practice independently to provide dental hygiene services in several settings outside the dental office, including homebound residences, schools, residential facilities and in dental professional shortage areas.

With required training, dental hygienists and extended function assistants can also 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

The three categories of dental assistants in California include those who are trained on-the-job to provide supportive duties in the office and licensed dental assistants who primarily work chairside with the dentist.

Under the supervision of a dentist, the unlicensed dental assistant may perform basic supportive duties such as preparing patients for dental treatment, preparing materials to be used in dental procedures, assisting the dentist chairside and taking and processing X-rays.

The registered dental assistant (RDA) is licensed and can perform the same tasks and procedures as the dental assistant. However, with additional training and the licensure status, the RDA can also provide chairside

support to dentists during more complex restorative and surgical procedures.

The registered dental assistant in extended functions (RDAEF) is the most highly trained dental assistant. The RDAEF significantly increases the care capacity of the dental team as they can complete most restorative procedures after the dentist provides diagnosis and surgical intervention.

Additionally, California recognizes specialized training for dental assistants in the fields of orthodontics and dental sedation and issues permits to assistants who have completed approved training.

Dental laboratory technician

A dental laboratory technician makes dental prostheses, which are replacements for natural teeth to help people eat, chew, talk and smile. The dental laboratory technician needs artistic aptitude for detailed and precise work, manual dexterity and skill in using small hand instruments and equipment.

Although they rarely work directly with patients, technicians are valuable members of the dental care team. They follow written instructions from dentists and use impressions (molds) of the patient's teeth or soft tissue to create full dentures, crowns, bridges and orthodontic appliances. Technicians often perform much of their work without close supervision.

Some duties of a dental laboratory technician may include:

- Fabricating fixed bridges, partials, dentures, veneers and crowns.
- Creating orthodontic appliances and splints to help straighten and protect teeth.
- Working with materials such as waxes, plastics, precious and non-precious alloys, stainless steel, a variety of porcelains and composites and polymer glass combinations.

