

Introduction

The dental assistant takes on significant responsibility as a member of the dental health care team. Assistants greatly increase the efficiency of the dentist in the delivery of quality oral health care and are valuable members of the dental care team. If you have strong communication skills, enjoy working with your hands as well as your mind and want a career with responsibility, dental assisting is for you.

The best way to become a dental assistant is to receive formal education. Studying in a Commission on Dental Accreditation accredited program provides education that is based on the latest procedures and techniques.

In some areas of the country, dental assistants can begin their careers without a college degree; however, education is encouraged. Assistants often have considerable freedom to choose their own hours. So if a career in health care and 1–2 years of formal education appeals to you, then dental assisting is a career you will want to explore.

A career as a dental assistant offers many challenges... in addition to assisting the dentist during a variety of procedures, other specific tasks dental assistants may perform include taking and developing dental radiographs (x-rays), sterilizing instruments and equipment and taking impressions of patients' teeth.

What do Dental Assistants do?

The duties of a dental assistant are among the most comprehensive and varied in the dental office. The dental assistant performs many tasks requiring both interpersonal and technical skills. Although state regulations vary, some specific tasks dental assistants may perform include:

- 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;
- serving as an infection control officer, developing infection control protocol and preparing and sterilizing instruments and equipment;
- helping patients feel comfortable before, during and after dental treatment;
- providing patients with instructions for oral care following surgery or other dental treatment procedures, such as the placement of a restoration (filling);
- teaching patients appropriate oral hygiene strategies to maintain oral health; (e.g., toothbrushing, flossing and nutritional counseling);
- taking impressions of patients' teeth for study casts (models of teeth);

- performing office management tasks that often require the use of a personal computer;
- communicating with patients and suppliers (e.g., scheduling appointments, answering the telephone, billing and ordering supplies); and
- assisting with and helping to provide direct patient care in all dental specialties, including orthodontics, pediatric dentistry, periodontics and oral surgery.

What are the advantages of a Dental Assisting career?

VARIETY: Dental assistants have one of the most diverse and interesting of all positions in a dental office. Dental assisting is a challenging and rewarding career, demanding versatility and a willingness to assume responsibility for many different tasks.

FLEXIBILITY: Since dental assistants are in demand, career options include both full-time and part-time positions.

EXCELLENT WORKING CONDITIONS: Dental offices are interesting, pleasant, people-oriented environments in which to work.

PERSONAL SATISFACTION: Dental assisting involves people contact, and with this personal interaction comes the personal satisfaction of knowing you've really helped someone by helping to provide a valuable health service.

Where do Dental Assistants work?

Since many dentists employ two or more dental assistants, employment opportunities in this field are excellent. The types of practice settings available to dental assistants include:

- solo dental practices (practices with only one dentist);
- group practices (practices with two or more dentists);
- specialty practices, such as oral and maxillo-facial surgery (removal of teeth and correction of facial deformities), orthodontics and dentofacial orthopedics (straightening teeth with braces or other appliances), endodontics (root canal treatment), periodontics (treatment of gum problems), prosthodontics (replacement of lost teeth) and pediatric dentistry (treatment of children);
- public health dentistry, including settings such as schools and clinics which focus on the prevention of dental problems within entire communities;
- hospital dental clinics, assisting dentists in the treatment of bedridden patients; and
- dental school clinics, assisting dental students as they learn to perform dental procedures.

Other career opportunities for Dental Assistants include:

- insurance companies, processing dental insurance claims;
- vocational schools, technical institutes, community colleges, dental schools and universities, teaching others to be dental assistants (which may require associate or baccalaureate college degrees); and
- dental product sales representatives.

What education / training does a Dental Assistant need?

It takes a relatively short period of time to become a dental assistant. 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 eleven months to complete, some schools offer accelerated training, part-time education programs or training via distance education.

Accreditation

The agency responsible for accrediting dental assisting programs and deciding whether or not they meet the standards for accreditation is the Commission on Dental Accreditation of the American Dental Association. There are approximately 245 Commission-accredited dental assisting programs in the United States.

Dental assistants may be the most valuable asset to a dental practice. In addition to performing technical duties, they play an important role in helping patients feel comfortable before, during and after dental treatment.

Certification

Dental assistants can become certified by passing an examination that evaluates their knowledge. Most dental assistants who choose to become nationally certified take the Dental Assisting National Board's (DANB) Certified Dental Assistant (CDA) examination. Becoming a Certified Dental Assistant (CDA) assures the public that the dental assistant is prepared to assist competently in the provision of dental care.

Dental assistants are eligible to take the CDA examination if they have completed a dental assisting program accredited by the Commission on Dental Accreditation. Individuals who have been trained on the job or have graduated from non-accredited programs are eligible to take the national certification examination after they have completed two years of full-time work experience as dental assistants. Some states also recognize passage of components of the CDA examination, such as the Radiation Health and Safety examination, or the Infection Control examination, for licensing and regulatory purposes.

State regulations vary, and some states offer registration or licensure in addition to this national certification program.

What is a Dental Assistant's earning potential?

The salary of a dental assistant depends primarily upon the responsibilities associated with the specific position and the geographic location of employment.

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

Where can I get more information?

Contact your dentist or the state and local dental society of the American Dental Association in your area. Perhaps you can arrange for a brief visit to a dental office to observe dental assistants at work. You can also contact an accredited dental assisting program and arrange to talk with a counselor and visit the school.

For a list of accredited Dental Assisting programs throughout the country, please contact:

The Commission on Dental Accreditation
211 E. Chicago Avenue
Chicago, IL 60611
TEL: 312.440.2718

The list can also be found through ADA ONLINE, the ADA'S Website, at <http://www.ada.org>

For more information about dental assisting write to or call:

American Dental Assistants Association
(ADAA)
203 North LaSalle Street, Suite 1320
Chicago, IL 60601-1225

TEL: 312.541.1550

FAX: 312.541.1496

(The American Dental Assistants Association is the national professional organization for dental assistants.)