

Careers in dentistry

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to work in the dental profession? Each dental team member has a unique job that requires a specific skill set; and each is crucial to a successful practice and high-quality patient care. If you've ever thought about a career in dentistry, the Academy of General Dentistry would like to offer you a glimpse into the dental professional's world.

What's it like to be a dentist? General dentists make up the majority of the 140,000 dentists practicing in the United States. Most of them own their own practice. General practitioners care for their patients' overall oral health, which the Surgeon General recently stated is crucial to a person's total health. General practitioners also coordinate care with dentists in other specialties when a patient needs a specialized procedure. (We'll talk about other dental specialties below.) Sometimes dentists become partners or associates with other dentists in a group practice. But most general practitioners own their practice, so they face the demands and reap the reward of running a small business as well as being a doctor. In return, dentists are their own bosses, and they set their own hours. Dentists enjoy prestige in their community and strong earning potential. Other dentists work in government health services, research programs, higher education, corporations and even the military. To become a dentist, you need a bachelor's degree with a strong science foundation: biology, chemistry, physics and mathematics are crucial. Admission to dental school, which lasts four years, requires high grades in college and a competitive score on the Dental Admission Test. After graduating from dental school, you'll have to take licensure examinations required by the state in which you wish to practice. Specialization requires another two years of school or a clinical residency program. All that education is a good investment. As start-up businesses most likely to succeed, dental practices rank third. And the demand for dental care is growing as public awareness of the importance of maintaining good oral health increases.

What's it like to be a hygienist? Dental hygienists help prevent tooth decay and maintain healthy gums by cleaning teeth to remove tartar, stains and plaque. Hygienists perform screenings to review a patient's health history and chart the condition of the patient's teeth; apply preventive materials such as fluoride; and teach proper brushing and flossing techniques. Hygienists must complete either a two-year certification program or a four-year college program that offers a bachelor's degree. Good grades in high school are required to get into a hygiene program. Hygienists must pass an exam to be licensed in the state in which they wish to practice. Hygienists work in a wide variety of settings including private dental practices, schools, community clinics, research teams and dental corporations. Full- and part-time employment options are available, as well as evening and weekend hours, enabling dental hygienists to balance their career and lifestyle needs. For more information on dental hygiene, check out the American Dental Hygienists' Association Web site at www.adha.org.

What's it like to be a dental assistant?

Dental assistants keep the dental practice running smoothly. A few of the assistant's tasks include greeting patients and preparing them for dental procedures, assisting the dentist during procedures and sometimes handling billing and insurance. Many community colleges and vocational schools offer dental assistant programs; but on-the-job training is also an option. Dentists are always looking for qualified, motivated assistants. Dental assistants need good communication and organizational skills, attention to detail and the ability to juggle multiple tasks. In return, they can enjoy good pay and flexible hours. 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. There are 254 accredited dental assisting programs in the United States. Dental assistants receive certification by passing an exam given by the Dental Assisting National Board (DANB), Certified Dental Assistant program. For more information, check out the Web sites for DANB, www.danb.org, or the American Dental Assistants Association, www.dentalassistant.org.

What's it like to be a dental technician?

Dental technicians work in labs where they make and repair dental appliances, including dentures, inlays, bridges, crowns and braces. Following a dentist's prescription technicians create appliances using wax, plasters, plastic, ceramics and metals from impressions taken of a patient's mouth or teeth. Most technicians learn their craft on the job, while others attend a formal training program that leads to an associate's degree in applied science. A few programs also offer a four-year bachelor's program in dental technology. Dental technicians may become certified by passing an examination evaluating their skills and knowledge. The work is extremely delicate and time consuming. Salaried technicians usually work 40 hours a week, but self-employed technicians frequently work longer hours. Demand for dental technicians is expected to rise as interest in cosmetic dentistry increases and more Americans need crown-and-bridge appliances as they age. For more information on lab technicians, visit the National Association of Dental Laboratories Web site at www.nadl.org.

For more information on dental careers, check out the US. Department of Labor's Occupational Outlook Handbook online at <http://stats.bls.gov/locol>.