DENTAL HYGIENIST

Dental Hygienists Dental hygienists clean teeth, examine patients for signs of oral diseases such as gingivitis, and provide other preventative dental care. They also educate patients on ways to improve and maintain good oral health.

DENTAL HYGIENISTS TYPICALLY DO THE FOLLOWING:

- Remove tartar, stains, and plaque from teeth
- Apply sealants and fluorides to help protect teeth
- Take and develop dental x rays
- Assess patients’ oral health and report findings to dentists
- Document patient care and treatment plans
- Educate patients about oral hygiene techniques, such as how to brush and floss correctly

Dental hygienists use many types of tools to do their job. They clean and polish teeth with hand, power, and ultrasonic tools. In some cases, they use lasers. Hygienists remove stains with an air-polishing device, which sprays a combination of air, water, and baking soda. They polish teeth with a powered tool that works like an automatic toothbrush. Hygienists use x-ray machines to take pictures to check for tooth or jaw problems.

Dental hygienists help patients develop and maintain good oral health. For example, they may explain the relationship between diet and oral health. They also may give advice to patients on how to select toothbrushes and other oral-care devices.

The tasks hygienists may perform, and the extent that they must be supervised by a dentist, varies by state and by the setting in which the dental hygienist works. Some states allow hygienists to independently diagnosis health problems and provide some treatments, such as application of fluorides and sealants.

IMPORTANT QUALITIES

- **Critical thinking.** Dental hygienists must use critical thinking skills in order to assess and evaluate patients.
- **Compassion.** Some patients are in extreme pain or have fears about undergoing dental treatment, and the hygienist must be sensitive to their emotions.
- **Detail oriented.** Dental hygienists must follow specific rules and protocols to help dentists diagnose and treat a patient. Depending on the state in which they work and/or the treatment provided, dental hygienists may work without the direct supervision of a dentist.
- **Dexterity.** Dental hygienists must be good at working with their hands. They generally work in tight quarters on a small part of the body, requiring fine motor skills using very precise tools and instruments.
- **Interpersonal skills.** Dental hygienists must work closely with dentists and patients.

EDUCATION/LICENSURE

Dental hygienists typically need an associate’s degree in dental hygiene. Bachelor’s degrees in dental hygiene are also available, but are less common. A bachelor’s or master’s degree usually is required for research, teaching, or clinical practice in public or school health programs.

Dental hygiene programs are commonly found in community colleges, technical schools, and universities. In 2015, the Commission on Dental Accreditation, part of the American Dental Association, accredited more than 300 dental hygiene programs.
Programs typically take 3 years to complete, and offer laboratory, clinical, and classroom instruction. Areas of study include anatomy, physiology, nutrition, radiography, pathology, medical ethics, head and neck anatomy, patient management, and periodontics, which is the study of gum disease.

High school students interested in becoming dental hygienists should take courses in biology, chemistry, and math. Most dental hygiene programs also require applicants to have completed at least 1 year of college. Specific entrance requirements vary by school.

Every state requires dental hygienists to be licensed; requirements vary by state. In most states, a degree from an accredited dental hygiene program and passing grades on written and clinical examinations is required for licensure. To maintain licensure, hygienists must complete continuing education requirements. For specific requirements, contact your state’s medical or health board. [https://www.dhp.virginia.gov/dentistry/dentistry_laws_regs.htm](https://www.dhp.virginia.gov/dentistry/dentistry_laws_regs.htm)

RELATED SCHOOLS in Virginia


**Associate Degree**
- Danville Community College (Distance learning with VWCC)
- Germanna Community College (Distance learning with NVCC)
- Northern Virginia Community College
- Thomas Nelson Community College
- Virginia Western Community College
- Wytheville Community College

**Bachelor of Science Degree**
- Old Dominion University
- Virginia Commonwealth University

**Master of Science Degree**
- Old Dominion University

**WORK ENVIRONMENT**
Flexible scheduling is a distinctive feature of this job. Full-time, part-time, evening, and weekend schedules are widely available. Dentists frequently hire hygienists to work only 2 or 3 days a week, so hygienists may hold jobs in more than one dental office. About half of dental hygienists worked part time in 2014.

Almost all dental hygienists work in dentists’ offices, which are clean and well lit. They work closely with dentists and dental assistants. Important health safeguards include strict adherence to proper radiological procedures, and the use of appropriate protective devices when administering anesthetic gas. Dental hygienists also wear safety glasses, surgical masks, and gloves to protect themselves and patients from infectious diseases.

**AVERAGE SALARY**
The median annual wage for dental hygienists was $71,520 in May 2014. The median wage is the wage at which half the workers in an occupation earned more than that amount and half earned less. The lowest 10 percent earned less than $49,190, and the highest 10 percent earned more than $97,390. Some dental hygienists receive benefits, such as vacation, sick leave, and contributions to their retirement fund. However, benefits vary by employer and may be available only to full-time workers.

**JOB OUTLOOK**
Employment of dental hygienists is projected to grow 19 percent from 2014 to 2024, much faster than the average for all occupations. Ongoing research linking oral health and general health will continue to spur the demand for preventive dental services.
The demand for dental services will increase as the population ages, cosmetic dental services become increasingly popular, and access to health insurance continues to grow.

As the large baby-boom population ages and people retain more of their original teeth than previous generations did, the need to maintain and treat these teeth will continue to drive demand for dental care. Cosmetic dental services, such as teeth-whitening treatments, have become increasingly popular. This trend is expected to continue as new technologies allow for less invasive, faster procedures.

The number of individuals who have access to health insurance is expected to continue to increase because of federal health insurance reform. People with new or expanded dental insurance coverage will be more likely to visit an oral healthcare provider than in the past. As a result, the demand for all dental services, including those performed by hygienists, will increase.

**Job Prospects**
Although the demand for dental services is growing, the number of new graduates from dental hygiene programs also has increased, resulting in more competition for jobs. Candidates can expect very strong competition for most full-time hygienist positions. Job seekers with previous work experience should have the best job opportunities. In addition, new dental hygiene-based workforce models are emerging and may provide additional opportunities for dental hygienists.

**PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS**

**American Dental Hygiene Association**
444 N. Michigan Avenue
Chicago, IL 60611
(312)440-8900
[http://www.adha.org](http://www.adha.org)

**Virginia Dental Hygienists’ Association, Inc.**
(888) RDH-VDHA
[http://www.rdh-VDHA.org](http://www.rdh-VDHA.org)

**REFERENCE**