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
- Keep track of patient care and treatment plans
- Teach patients oral hygiene, 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 both hand and powered tools, as well as ultrasonic devices. In some cases, they 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 keep good oral health. For example, they may explain the relationship between diet and oral health. They also may give patients advice to patients on how to select toothbrushes and other oral-care devices.

Other tasks hygienists may perform vary by state. Some states allow hygienists to place and carve filling materials, temporary fillings, and periodontal dressings.

IMPORTANT QUALITIES

- **Compassion.** Sometimes patients are in extreme pain or have fears about undergoing dental work, and the hygienist must be sensitive to their emotions.
- **Detail oriented.** Dental hygienists must follow specific rules and protocols to help diagnose and treat a patient. In rare cases, dental hygienists 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 using very precise tools and instruments.
- **Interpersonal skills.** Dental hygienists must work closely with dentists and patients.
- **Stamina.** Dental hygienists should be comfortable performing physical tasks, such as bending over patients for a long time.
- **Technical skills.** Dental hygienists must understand how to operate complex machinery, including x-ray machines and powered instruments.

EDUCATION/LICENSURE

Dental hygienists typically need an **associate’s degree** in dental hygiene to enter the occupation. Certificates, bachelor’s degrees, and master’s degrees in dental hygiene are also available but are less common among dental hygienists. Private dental offices usually require a minimum of an associate’s degree or a certificate in dental hygiene. A bachelor’s or master’s degree is usually required for research, teaching, or clinical practice in public or school health programs.

In the state of Virginia, dental hygienists must obtain a license from the Virginia Board of Dentistry. In order to receive this license, applicants must be graduates of an accredited dental hygiene program, pass the dental hygiene examination given by the Joint Commission on Dental Examinations and pass a clinical examination.
License renewal is granted annually upon completion of required continuing education.

RELATED SCHOOLS

**Associate Degree**
- Danville Community College
- Germanna Community College
- J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College
- 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. More than half of dental hygienists worked part time in 2012.

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 $70,210 in May 2012. 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% earned less than $46,540 and the top 10% earned more than $96,280.

Pay for dental hygienists may be for each hour worked, each day worked, on a regular yearly salary, or on commission. Some dental hygienists also get 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 33 percent from 2012 to 2022, much faster than the average for all occupations. Ongoing research linking oral health and general health will continue to spur the demand for preventative dental services, which are often provided by dental hygienists.

As their practices expand, dentists will hire more hygienists to perform routine dental care, allowing the dentist to see more patients. In addition, as the large baby-boom population ages and people keep 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.

Federal health legislation is expected to expand the number of patients who have access to health insurance. People with new or expanded dental insurance coverage will be more likely to visit a dentist than in the past. As a result, the demand for all dental services, including those performed by hygienists, will increase.
PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS
American Dental Hygiene Association
444 N. Michigan Avenue
Chicago, IL 60611
(312)440-8900
http://www.adha.org

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