

Dentists: Doctors of Oral Health



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Most Americans today enjoy excellent oral health and are keeping their natural teeth throughout their lives. But this is not the case for everyone. Cavities are still the most prevalent chronic disease of childhood. Further, about 100 million Americans did not see a dentist in 2007, even though regular dental examinations and good oral hygiene can prevent most dental disease.

Too many people mistakenly believe that they need to see a dentist only if they are in pain or think something is wrong, but they're missing the bigger picture. A dental visit means being examined by a doctor of oral health capable of diagnosing and treating conditions that can range from routine to extremely complex.

The American Dental Association believes that a better understanding of the intensive academic and clinical education that dentists undergo, their role in delivering oral health care and, most important, the degree to which dental disease is almost entirely preventable is essential to ensuring that more Americans enjoy the lifelong benefits of good oral health.



A Team Approach

The team approach to dentistry promotes continuity of care that is comprehensive, convenient, cost effective and efficient. Members of the team include dental assistants, lab technicians and dental hygienists. Leading the team is the dentist, a doctor specializing in oral health who has earned either a Doctor of Dental Medicine (DMD) degree or a Doctor of Dental Surgery (DDS) degree, which are essentially the same.

The Dentist's Role

Dentists are doctors who specialize in oral health. Their responsibilities include:

- **Diagnosing oral diseases.**
- **Creating treatment plans to maintain or restore the oral health of their patients.**
- **Interpreting x-rays and diagnostic tests.**
- **Ensuring the safe administration of anesthetics.**
- **Monitoring growth and development of the teeth and jaws.**
- **Performing surgical procedures on the teeth, bone and soft tissues of the oral cavity.**
- **Managing oral trauma and other emergency situations.**

Dentists' oversight of the clinical team is critical to ensuring safe and effective oral care. Even seemingly routine procedures such as tooth extractions, preparing and placing fillings or administering anesthetics carry potential risks of complications such as infection, temporary or even permanent nerve damage, prolonged bleeding, hematomas and pain.

As doctors of oral health, dentists must be able to diagnose and treat a range of conditions and know how to deal with complications—some of which are potentially life-threatening.



Photo courtesy of American Dental Education Association

More than Just Teeth and Gums

Dentists' areas of care include not only their patients' teeth and gums but also the muscles of the head, neck and jaw, the tongue, salivary glands, and the nervous system of the head and neck. During a comprehensive exam, dentists examine the teeth and gums, but they also look for lumps, swellings, discolorations, ulcerations—any abnormality. When appropriate, they perform procedures such as biopsies, diagnostic tests for chronic or infectious diseases, salivary gland function, and screening tests for oral cancer. In addition, dentists can spot early warning signs in the mouth that may indicate disease elsewhere in the body. Dentists' training also enables them to recognize situations that warrant referring patients for care by dental specialists or physicians.



Education and Clinical Training

The level of education and clinical training required to earn a dental degree, and the high academic standards of dental schools, are on par with those of medical schools and are essential to preparing dentists for the safe and effective practice of modern oral health care.

Most dental students have earned Bachelor of Science degrees or their equivalent, and all have passed rigorous admission examinations.

The curricula during the first two years of dental and medical schools are essentially the same—students must complete such biomedical science courses as anatomy, biochemistry, physiology, microbiology, immunology and pathology. During

the second two years, dental students' coursework focuses on clinical practice—diagnosing and treating oral diseases. After earning their undergraduate and dental degrees (eight years for most) many dentists continue their education and training to achieve certification in one of nine recognized dental specialties.

Upon completing their training, dentists must pass both a rigorous national written examination and a state or regional clinical licensing exam in order to practice. As a condition of licensure, they must meet continuing education requirements for the remainder of their careers, to keep them up-to-date on the latest scientific and clinical developments.

Why Oral Health Matters

Numerous recent scientific studies indicate associations between oral health and a variety of general health conditions—including diabetes and heart disease. In response, the World Health Organization has integrated oral health into its chronic disease prevention efforts “as the risks to health are linked.”

The American Dental Association recommends that dental visits begin no later than a child's first birthday to establish a “dental home.” Dentists can provide guidance to children and parents, deliver preventive oral health services, and diagnose and treat dental disease in its earliest stages. This ongoing dental care will help both children and adults maintain optimal oral health throughout their lifetimes.





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Improving the Nation's Oral Health

Despite all we know about the importance of oral health to overall health, to people's self-esteem and to their employability, state and federal policies continually sell dental care short.

- Most states spend 2 percent or less of their Medicaid budgets on dental services.
- Only 16 states offered substantive coverage for adult Medicaid enrollees in 2007.
- An estimated 164 million work hours are lost each year due to oral disease.

The American Dental Association is committed to improving the nation's oral health through public education and through legislative advocacy to strengthen funding for dental services provided through public health programs.

Together, we can work to improve America's oral health and give all of us something to smile about.

Years of Specialty Training Beyond a Four-Year Dental Degree

Pediatric Dentistry	Oral health care needs of infants and children through adolescence	2 years, 1 month
Endodontics	Health of dental pulp, the soft core of teeth, specializes in performing root canals	2 years, 2 months
Periodontics	Treats diseases of the gum tissue and bone supporting the teeth	2 years, 11 months
Orthodontics and Dentofacial Orthopedics	Correcting dental and facial irregularities	2 years, 6 months
Prosthodontics	Restoring natural teeth or replacing missing teeth or oral structures with artificial devices, such as dentures	2 years, 8 months
Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery	Surgical treatment of disease and injuries of the mouth	4 years, 6 months to 6 years*
Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology	Diseases of the mouth, teeth and surrounding regions	3 years, 1 month
Oral and Maxillofacial Radiology	X-rays and other forms of imaging used for diagnosis and management of oral diseases and disorders	2 years, 6 months
Dental Public Health	Preventing dental disease through organized community efforts	1 year, 3 months

* Many oral and maxillofacial surgeons obtain medical (M.D.) degrees in conjunction with their programs

ADA American Dental Association®

America's leading advocate for oral health

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