

Dental Assistant

Professional Activities

Dental assistants perform a variety of patient care, office, and laboratory duties. They work chairside as dentists examine and treat patients. They make patients as comfortable as possible in the dental chair, prepare them for treatment, and obtain dental records. Assistants hand instruments and materials to dentists and keep patients' mouths dry and clear by using suction or other devices. Assistants also sterilize and disinfect instruments and equipment, prepare tray setups for dental procedures, and instruct patients on postoperative and general oral health care.

Those with laboratory duties make casts of the teeth and mouth from impressions taken by dentists, clean and polish removable appliances, and make temporary crowns. Dental assistants with office duties schedule and confirm appointments, receive patients, keep treatment records, send bills, receive payments, and order dental supplies and materials.

Dental assistants should not be confused with dental hygienists, who are licensed to perform different clinical tasks.

Dental assistants work in a well-lighted, clean environment. Their work area is usually near the dental chair so that they can arrange instruments, materials, and medication and hand them to the dentist when needed. Dental assistants wear uniforms, as well as gloves, masks, eyewear, and protective clothing to protect themselves and their patients from infectious diseases. Following safety procedures also minimizes the risks associated with the use of radiographic equipment.

Almost half of dental assistants have a 35 to 40-hour work week, which may include work on Saturdays or evenings.

Educational Requirements

Many assistants learn their skills on the job, although an increasing number are trained in dental-assisting programs offered by community and junior colleges, trade schools, technical institutes, or the Armed Forces. Most programs take 1 year to complete. For assistants to perform more advanced functions, or to have the ability to complete radiological procedures, many States require assistants to obtain a license or certification.

A period of on-the-job training is often required even for those who have completed a dental-assisting program or have some previous experience. Different dentists may have their own styles of doing things that need to be learned before an assistant can be comfortable working with them. Office-specific information, such as where files and instruments are kept, will need to be learned at each new job. Also, as dental technology changes, dental assistants need to stay familiar with the instruments and procedures that they will be using or helping dentists to use. On-the-job training may be sufficient to keep assistants up to date on these matters.

Academic Programs

[Illinois Valley Community College](#)

[John A. Logan College](#)

[Kaskaskia College](#)

[Lewis & Clark Community College](#)

Employment/Salary Outlook

Ongoing research linking oral health and general health will likely continue to increase the demand for preventive dental services. Dentists will continue to hire more dental assistants to complete routine tasks, allowing the dentist to see more patients in their practice and to spend their time on more complex procedures. As dental practices grow, more dental assistants will be needed. Job prospects should be excellent, as dentists continue to need the aid of qualified dental assistants.

State and National Wages

Location	Pay Period	2021		
		Low	Median	High
United States	Hourly	\$14.22	\$20.78	\$26.48
	Annual	\$29,580	\$38,660	\$59,540
Illinois	Hourly	\$14.22	\$18.59	\$28.63
	Annual	\$29,570	\$43,220	\$55,090

State and National Trends

United States	Employment		Percent Change	Job Openings ¹
	2020	2030		
Dental Assistants	330,200	367,000	1%	44,000
Illinois	Employment		Percent Change	Job Openings ¹
	2018	202		
Dental Assistants	12,750	13,430	+5%	1,530

¹Job Openings refers to the average annual job openings due to growth and net replacement

Professional Organizations

American Dental Association (ada.org)

American Dental Assistants Association (dentalassistant.org)

Dental Assisting National Board (danb.org)

References

Occupational Outlook Handbook, U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics
(<http://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/dental-assistants>)

O*NET OnLine (<https://www.onetonline.org/link/summary/31-9091.00>)

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