

# Profession Profile: Dental Assistant



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Certifying Excellence in Allied Health

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A dental assistant is an integral member of the dental health team, competent via education, experience and understanding of patient welfare. The dental assistant is qualified to provide support in administrative duties for chairside, laboratory and radiological procedures, as defined by existing state laws. As an agent of the dentist, the dental assistant strives to cultivate good will and confidence within the dental practice.

## Duties

Dental assistants perform a variety of patient care, office and laboratory duties. They are different from dental hygienists, who must be licensed to perform different clinical tasks. Dental assistants can perform the following duties:

- Ensure that patients are comfortable in the dental chair
- Prepare patients and the work area for treatments and procedures
- Sterilize dental instruments
- Help dentists by handing them instruments during procedures
- Keep patients' mouths dry by using suction hoses and other equipment
- Instruct patients in proper oral hygiene
- Process x-rays and complete lab tasks, under the direction of a dentist
- Keep records of dental treatments
- Schedule patient appointments
- Work with patients on billing and payment



## Education and Training

Many dental assistants learn their skills on the job, but there are many community colleges, trade schools, technical institutions and Armed Forces that offer dental assisting programs. Dental assisting programs include classroom, laboratory and preclinical instruction in dental assisting skills and related theory. In addition, students may gain practical experience in dental schools, clinics or dental offices. Most programs take less than one year to complete and lead to a certificate or diploma. Two-year programs offered in community or junior colleges lead to an associate degree. All programs require a high school diploma or its equivalent and some may require a typing or science course for admission.

## Choosing an Accredited Program

**Licensure:** Some states require dental assistants to be licensed, registered or certified, which may require passing a written or practical examination. States requiring licensure have a list of schools offering courses, usually less than one year in length. Some states require continuing education to maintain licensure.

## Is It Right For You?

Dental assistants must be detail oriented and be able to follow specific rules and protocols when helping dentists treat patients. They must be good at working with their hands as they generally work in tight quarters on a small part of the body, using very precise tools and instruments. Dental assistants should be able to listen to patients and know how to be sensitive to patients are in extreme pain and/or mental stress. They also need to follow directions from a dentist or dental hygienist as well as have excellent organizational skills.

## Employment

Dental assistants held about 318,800 jobs in 2014. Employment of dental assistants is expected to grow by 18 percent from 2014 to 2024, much faster than the average for all occupations. Ongoing research linking oral health and general health will 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 spend their time on more complex procedures. As dental practices grow, more dental assistants will be needed.

As the large baby-boom population ages, and as people keep more of their original teeth than did previous generations, the need to maintain and treat teeth will continue to increase the need for dental assistants.

## Salary

The median annual wage of dental assistants was \$36,940 in May 2016. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$25,460, and the top 10 percent earned more than \$52,000.

## Want To Learn More?

Visit the US Bureau of Labor Statistics:

<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/dental-assistants.htm>