

Want Some Life Saving Advice?

Ask Your Dental Hygienist About What to Expect from a Dental Hygiene Appointment

Dental hygienists are licensed oral health care professionals who have completed extensive educational and clinical preparation in preventive oral health care.

In all states but one, to become licensed, dental hygienists must graduate from an accredited dental hygiene education program, pass the National Board Dental Hygiene Examination, and pass a state/regional clinical licensure examination.

Accredited education programs are offered at universities and community and technical colleges, with programs varying from two to four years in length, but including prerequisites, averaging three. Graduates may obtain a bachelor's degree, an associate degree, or a certificate, depending on the program. Some dental hygienists go on to earn Master's and Doctorate degrees.

In addition, continuing advances in the dental hygiene field and changing laws in many states have encouraged virtually all registered dental hygienists to participate in continuing education courses, keeping them up to date on the latest trends in dental hygiene practice and legislation regarding the profession.

So What Should You Expect from Your Dental Hygienist?

Registered dental hygienists can provide a wide range of services as determined by laws in each state. These services include the following:

- After assessing a patient's individual oral health condition and incorporating the most current scientific research, including consideration of the impact of oral health on diseases such as heart disease and diabetes, dental hygienists plan a specific treatment plan designed to make sure each patient has the best oral health possible.
- Targeted and specific dental hygiene treatment for children, adolescents, adults, older adults, and patients who are medically compromised.
- Because targeted and specific systemic diseases like heart disease and diabetes, as well as other conditions, have signs and symptoms that appear in the mouth first, dental hygienists monitor for evidence of disease, and where they find suspicious conditions, inform the patient and recommend a visit to a physician.
- While assessing a patient's overall health, they also look for problems such as caries (cavities) and periodontal (gum) disease.

Who's Taking Care of Your Oral Health?

When you go for your oral health appointment, make sure you are receiving care from a properly educated and licensed oral health prevention specialist—a registered dental hygienist.

- Ask the person delivering care if he or she has graduated from an education program accredited by the American Dental Association Commission on Dental Accreditation.
 - Look to see if the dental hygienist's "RDH" license is in plain view.
 - Get to know your dental hygienist by name.
 - Ask your dental hygienist for treatment and at-home-care plans.
 - Ask your dental hygienist to recommend oral health products that are specially formulated for your oral health care needs.
 - Prevention is the key: discuss any questions or concerns you have about oral health as part of total health with your dental hygienist.
- Dental hygienists perform thorough head-and-neck examinations to look for oral cancer and other problems.
 - To prevent and treat disease, they remove plaque (a stubborn film that contains bacteria), and calculus, both above and below the gum line.
 - To prevent caries, dental hygienists provide nutrition counseling, apply fluorides or pit-and-fissure sealants, and in some states, polish and contour fillings.
 - Because dental hygienists specialize in preventive oral health care, they educate their patients, the community, and schools on oral health and its effect on overall health, as well provide dietary education and counseling.
 - They expose, develop, and interpret oral X-rays.
 - In many states, registered dental hygienists administer local anesthesia and/or nitrous oxide.
 - Dental hygienists also evaluate how their recommendations are working and, when necessary, revise treatment as it progresses to help patients achieve their oral health goals.



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