Dental Assistants

Summary

Dental assistants work closely with dentists and dental hygienists in dental offices.

Quick Facts: Dental Assistants

| 2012 Median Pay          | $34,500 per year  
|                         | $16.59 per hour   |
| Entry-Level Education   | Postsecondary non-degree award |
| Work Experience in a Related Occupation | None |
| On-the-job Training     | None |
| Number of Jobs, 2012    | 303,200 |
| Job Outlook, 2012-22    | 25% (Much faster than average) |
| Employment Change, 2012-22 | 74,400 |

What Dental Assistants Do

Dental assistants have many tasks, ranging from providing patient care and taking x rays to recordkeeping and scheduling appointments. Their duties vary by state and by the dentists' offices where they work.

Work Environment

Almost all dental assistants work in dentists' offices. Most work full time.

How to Become a Dental Assistant

There are several possible paths to becoming a dental assistant. Some states require assistants to graduate from an accredited program and pass a state exam. In other states, there are no formal educational requirements.

Pay

The median annual wage for dental assistants was $34,500 in May 2012.

Job Outlook

Employment of dental assistants is projected to grow 25 percent from 2012 to 2022, much faster than the average for all occupations. Ongoing research linking oral health and general health will likely continue to increase the demand for preventive dental services.

Similar Occupations

Compare the job duties, education, job growth, and pay of dental assistants with similar occupations.
Dental Assistants have many tasks, ranging from patient care and taking x rays to recordkeeping and scheduling appointments. Their duties vary by state and by the dentists’ offices where they work.

Duties

Dental assistants typically do the following:

- Work with patients to make them comfortable in the dental chair and to prepare them for treatments and procedures
- Sterilize dental instruments
- Prepare the work area for patient treatment by setting out instruments and materials
- Help dentists by handing them instruments during procedures
- Keep patients’ mouths dry by using suction hoses and other equipment
- Instruct patients in proper dental 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

Assistants who perform lab tasks, such as making casts of a patient’s teeth, work under the direction of a dentist. They may prepare materials for casts of teeth or to create temporary crowns.

All dental assistants complete tasks, such as helping dentists with procedures and keeping patient records, but there are four regulated tasks that assistants may perform, depending on the state where they work.

- Coronal polishing
- Sealant application
Fluoride application
- Topical anesthetics application

Coronal polishing, which means removing soft deposits such as plaque, gives teeth a cleaner appearance. In sealant application, a dental assistant paints a thin, plastic substance over teeth that seals out food particles and acid-producing bacteria to keep teeth from developing cavities. Fluoride application, in which fluoride is put directly on the teeth, is another anti-cavity measure. Some dental assistants may be qualified to apply topical anesthetic to an area of a patient’s mouth, temporarily numbing the area to help prepare a patient for procedures.

Not all states allow dental assistants to complete these tasks. Each state regulates the scope of practice for dental assistants and may require them to take specific exams or meet other requirements before allowing them to perform these procedures.

**Work Environment**

Dental assistants provide support to dentists as they work on patients.

Dental assistants held about 303,200 jobs in 2012. Almost all dental assistants work in dentists' offices. Dental assistants work under the supervision of dentists and may work closely with dental hygienists in their day-to-day activities.

Dental assistants wear safety glasses, surgical masks, protective clothing, and gloves to protect themselves and patients from infectious diseases. They must also follow safety procedures to minimize risks associated with x-ray machines.

**Work Schedules**

Most dental assistants work full time. However, about 1 in 3 assistants worked part time in 2012. Some work evenings or weekends, depending on the office where they work.

**How to Become a Dental Assistant**

Dental assistants hand tools to dentists as they work.
There are several possible paths to becoming a dental assistant. Some states require assistants to graduate from an accredited program and pass a state exam. In other states, there are no formal educational requirements.

**Education**

High school students interested in a career as a dental assistant should take courses in biology, chemistry, and anatomy. Some states require assistants to graduate from an accredited program and pass a state exam. Most programs are offered by community colleges, take about 1 year to complete, and lead to a certificate or diploma. Programs that last 2 years, also offered in community colleges, are less common and lead to an associate’s degree. The Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA), part of the American Dental Association, approved more than 250 dental-assisting training programs in 2013.

Accredited programs include classroom and laboratory work in which students learn about teeth, gums, jaws, and other areas that dentists work on and the instruments that dentists use. These programs also include supervised, practical experience.

**Training**

Dental assistants who do not have formal education in dental assisting may learn their duties through on-the-job training. A dental assistant or dentist in the office teaches the new assistant dental terminology, the names of the instruments, how to complete daily tasks, how to interact with patients, and other activities necessary to help keep the dental office running smoothly.

**Important Qualities**

*Detail oriented.* Dental assistants must follow specific rules and protocols to help dentists treat patients. Assistants must be aware of what practices they are allowed to complete in the state where they work.

*Interpersonal skills.* Dental assistants must work closely with dentists and patients. Sometimes, patients are in extreme pain and/or mental stress, so the assistant should be sensitive to their emotions.

*Listening skills.* Dental assistants should be able to listen to patients and other healthcare workers. They need to follow directions from a dentist or dental hygienist, so they can help treat patients and do tasks, such as taking an x-ray.

*Organizational skills.* Dental assistants should have excellent organizational skills. They should have the correct tools in place for a dentist or dental hygienist to use when treating a patient.

**Licenses, Certifications, and Registrations**

Some states require dental assistants to be certified; requirements vary by state. To obtain certification, dental assistants must pass the Certified Dental Assistant (CDA) exam from the Dental Assisting National Board (DANB). To take the exam, dental assistants must either have graduated from an accredited program or have a high school diploma, and complete the required amount of on-the-job training. Applicants must also have current certification in CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation).

Some states require that dental assistants be licensed or register with DANB to complete regulated tasks, such as coronal polishing, in a dentist’s office; requirements vary by state. In other states, there are no formal educational requirements to become an entry-level dental assistant. Contact state boards of dentistry for specific requirements.

**Pay**

![Dental Assistants Median annual wages, May 2012](http://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/print/dental-assistants.htm)
The median annual wage for dental assistants was $34,500 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 percent earned less than $23,550, and the top 10 percent earned more than $47,580.

Most dental assistants work full time. However, about 1 in 3 assistants worked part time in 2012. Some work evenings or weekends, depending on the hours of operation at the office where they work.

Job Outlook

Employment of dental assistants is projected to grow 25 percent from 2012 to 2022, much faster than the average for all occupations. 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.

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 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. This will increase the demand for all dental services, including those performed by dental assistants.

### Employment projections data for Dental Assistants, 2012-22

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dental assistants</td>
<td>31-9091</td>
<td>303,200</td>
<td>377,600</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>74,400</td>
<td>[XLS]</td>
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Similar Occupations
This table shows a list of occupations with job duties that are similar to those of dental assistants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OCCUPATION</th>
<th>JOB DUTIES</th>
<th>ENTRY-LEVEL EDUCATION</th>
<th>2012 MEDIAN PAY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dental Hygienists</td>
<td>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.</td>
<td>Associate’s degree</td>
<td>$70,210</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medical Assistants</td>
<td>Medical assistants complete administrative and clinical tasks in the offices of physicians, podiatrists, chiropractors, and other health practitioners. Their duties vary with the location, specialty, and size of the practice.</td>
<td>Postsecondary non-degree award</td>
<td>$29,370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational Therapy Assistants and Aides</td>
<td>Occupational therapy assistants and aides help patients develop, recover, and improve the skills needed for daily living and working. Occupational therapy assistants are directly involved in providing therapy to patients, while occupational therapy aides typically perform support activities. Both assistants and aides work under the direction of occupational therapists.</td>
<td>See How to Become One</td>
<td>$48,940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Therapist Assistants and Aides</td>
<td>Physical therapist assistants (sometimes called PTAs) and physical therapist aides work under the direction and supervision of physical therapists. They help patients who are recovering from injuries and illnesses regain movement and manage pain.</td>
<td>See How to Become One</td>
<td>$39,430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surgical Technologists</td>
<td>Surgical technologists, also called operating room technicians, assist in surgical operations. They prepare operating rooms, arrange equipment, and help doctors during surgeries.</td>
<td>Postsecondary non-degree award</td>
<td>$41,790</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmacy Technicians</td>
<td>Pharmacy technicians help licensed pharmacists dispense prescription medication to customers or health professionals.</td>
<td>High school diploma or equivalent</td>
<td>$29,320</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contacts for More Information

For more information about becoming a dental assistant and for a list of accredited dental assistant programs, visit [Commission on Dental Accreditation, American Dental Association](http://www.ada.org). For more information about becoming a Certified Dental Assistant and for a list of state boards of dentistry, visit [Dental Assisting National Board, Inc.](http://www.adagpa.org).