

Dentist

Professional Activities

Dentists diagnose and treat problems with teeth and tissues in the mouth, along with giving advice and administering care to help prevent future problems. They provide instruction on diet, brushing, flossing, the use of fluorides, and other aspects of dental care. They remove tooth decay, fill cavities, examine x rays, place protective plastic sealants on children's teeth, straighten teeth, and repair fractured teeth. They also perform corrective surgery on gums and supporting bones to treat gum diseases. Dentists extract teeth and make models and measurements for dentures to replace missing teeth. They also administer anesthetics and write prescriptions for antibiotics and other medications.

Dentists use a variety of equipment, including x-ray machines, drills, mouth mirrors, probes, forceps, brushes, and scalpels. Lasers, digital scanners, and other computer technologies also may be used. Dentists wear masks, gloves, and safety glasses to protect themselves and their patients from infectious diseases.

Dentists in private practice oversee a variety of administrative tasks, including bookkeeping and the buying of equipment and supplies. They may employ and supervise dental hygienists, dental assistants, dental laboratory technicians, and receptionists.

Most dentists are solo practitioners, meaning that they own their own businesses and work alone or with a small staff. Some dentists have partners, and a few work for other dentists as associate dentists.

Most dentists work 4 or 5 days a week. Some work evenings and weekends to meet their patients' needs. The number of hours worked varies greatly among dentists. Most full-time dentists work between 35 and 40 hours a week. However, others, especially those who are trying to establish a new practice, work more. Also, experienced dentists often work fewer hours. It is common for dentists to continue in part-time practice well beyond the usual retirement age.

Dentists usually work in the safety of an office environment. However, work-related injuries can occur, such as those resulting from the use of hand-held tools when performing dental work on patients.

Educational Requirements

Dental schools require a minimum of 2 years of college-level pre-dental education. However, most dental students have at least a bachelor's degree. Pre-dental education emphasizes course work in the sciences. All dental schools require applicants to take the Dental Admissions Test (DAT). When selecting students, schools consider scores earned on the DAT, the applicants' grade point average, and information gathered through recommendations and interviews.

Dental school usually lasts 4 academic years. Studies begin with classroom instruction and laboratory work. Beginning courses in clinical sciences, including laboratory techniques, are also provided at this time. During the last 2 years, students treat patients, usually in dental clinics, under the supervision of licensed dentists. Most dental schools award the degree of Doctor of Dental Surgery (D.D.S.). The rest award an equivalent degree, Doctor of Dental Medicine (D.M.D.). Dentists who want to teach or conduct research usually spend an additional 2 to 5 years in advanced dental training, in programs operated by dental schools or hospitals.

Some dental school graduates work for established dentists as associates for a year or two in order to gain experience and save money to equip an office of their own. Most dental school graduates, however, purchase an established practice or open a new practice immediately after graduation. According to the ADA, each year about 12 percent of new graduates enroll in postgraduate training programs to prepare for a dental specialty.

High school and college students who want to become dentists should take courses in biology, chemistry, physics, health, and mathematics. College undergraduates planning on applying to dental school are required to take many science courses.

All 50 States and the District of Columbia require dentists to be licensed. To qualify for a license in most States, candidates must graduate from 1 of the 56 dental schools accredited by the American Dental Association’s (ADA’s) Commission on Dental Accreditation, and then must pass written and practical examinations. Candidates may fulfill the written part of the State licensing requirements by passing the National Board Dental Examinations. Individual States or regional testing agencies administer the written or practical examinations. Currently, about 17 states require dentists to obtain a specialty license before practicing as a specialist. Requirements include 2 to 4 years of postgraduate education and, in some cases, completion of a special state examination. Most state licenses permit dentists to engage in both general and specialized practice.

Academic Programs

[Midwestern University](#)

[Southern Illinois University Edwardsville](#)

[University of Illinois at Chicago](#)

Employment/Salary Outlook

Employment of dentists is projected to grow by 16 percent through 2018, which is faster than the average for all occupations. The demand for dental services is expected to continue to increase. The overall U.S. population is growing, and the elderly segment of the population is growing even faster; these phenomena will increase the demand for dental care. Many members of the baby-boom generation will need complicated dental work. In addition, elderly people are more likely to retain their teeth than were their predecessors, so they will require much more care than in the past. The younger generation will continue to need preventive checkups despite an overall increase in the dental health of the public over the last few decades. Recently, some private insurance providers have increased their dental coverage. If this trend continues, people with new or expanded dental insurance will be more likely to visit a dentist than in the past. Also, although they are currently a small proportion of dental expenditures, cosmetic dental services, such as providing teeth-whitening treatments, will become increasingly popular. This trend is expected to continue as new technologies allow these procedures to take less time and be much less invasive.

As an increasing number of dentists from the baby-boom generation reach retirement age, many of them will retire or work fewer hours and stop taking on new patients. Furthermore, the number of applicants to, and graduates from, dental schools has increased in recent years. Job prospects should be good, because younger dentists will be able to take over the work of older dentists who retire or cut back on hours, as well as provide dental services to accommodate the growing demand.

State and National Wages

Location	Pay Period	2009				
		10%	25%	Median	75%	90%
United States	Hourly	\$33.55	\$48.23	\$68.31	\$80.00+	\$80.00+
	Yearly	\$69,800	\$100,300	\$142,100	\$166,400+	\$166,400+
Illinois	Hourly	\$22.59	\$47.62	\$67.22	\$80.00+	\$80.00+
	Yearly	\$47,000	\$99,000	\$139,800	\$166,400+	\$166,400+

State and National Trends

United States	Employment		Percent Change	Job Openings ¹
	2008	2018		
Dentists, general	120,200	138,600	+15%	5,180
Illinois	Employment		Percent Change	Job Openings ¹
	2008	2018		
Dentists, general	5,320	5,950	+12%	210

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

Professional Organizations

American Dental Association
 211 East Chicago Ave.
 Chicago, IL 60611-2678
 312-440-2500
<http://www.ada.org/>

American Dental Education Association
 1400 K Street, NW, Suite 1100
 Washington, DC 20005
 Tel: 202-289-7201
 Fax: 202-289-7204
www.adea.org

References

Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2010-11 Edition, Dentists, on the Internet at <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos072.htm>

O*NET OnLine, on the Internet at <http://online.onetcenter.org/link/summary/29-1021.00>

Date Last Modified: May 23, 2011