

Orthodontist

Professional Activities

Orthodontists straighten teeth by applying pressure to the teeth with braces or retainers. Orthodontists use a variety of equipment, including X-ray machines, drills, and instruments such as mouth mirrors, probes, forceps, brushes, and scalpels. They wear masks, gloves, and safety glasses to protect themselves and their patients from infectious diseases. Orthodontists in private practice oversee a variety of administrative tasks, including bookkeeping, and buying equipment and supplies.

Most full-time orthodontists work about 40 hours a week, but others work more. Initially, orthodontists may work more hours as they establish their practice. Experienced orthodontists often work fewer hours. A considerable number continue in part-time practice well beyond the usual retirement age. Most orthodontists are “solo practitioners,” meaning they own their own businesses and work alone or with a small staff. Some orthodontists have partners.

Educational Requirements

Before you may be admitted to a dental program and train as an orthodontist, you must complete pre-dental requirements as an undergraduate. Most dental programs prefer to admit students with a bachelor's degree, though some will accept students with a minimum of two years of undergraduate education. Required pre-dental courses generally include chemistry, biology, physics and other science courses. You can choose to major in any subject, but since science courses are required anyway, many pre-dental students choose to major in a science, such as biology or chemistry. When you apply to dental school, you'll be required to take the Dental Admission Test (DAT), which is administered by the American Dental Association (ADA).

Dental programs last an average of four years, and upon graduation you'll earn a Doctor of Dental Surgery (D.D.S.) or a Doctor of Dental Medicine (D.M.D.) degree. Your first two years will typically be spent taking basic science courses, such as biochemistry, anatomy, physiology and microbiology. Your final two years will likely be spent gaining clinical experience under the guidance of licensed dentists. During your final two years of dental school, you'll gain exposure to different dental specialties, such as orthodontics, periodontics, pediatric dentistry, prosthodontics and maxillofacial surgery.

After completing a dental program, you'll need to apply to orthodontic specialty programs. One way to apply to these programs is by using the Postdoctoral Application Support Service, offered by the American Dental Education Association (www.adea.org). This service provides a standard format that will allow you to fill out just one application and apply to multiple programs.

Most orthodontic programs last three years, during which time you'll most likely learn about orthodontics (tooth movement), surgical orthodontics and dentofacial orthopedics (guidance of facial development). You may also receive training in research methodology and teaching, complete a research project, attend conferences and prepare case reports. Upon completion of your program, you'll be qualified as a dental specialist in orthodontics.

Academic Programs

[University of Illinois at Chicago](#)

Employment/Salary Outlook

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.

Employment of dentists is not expected to keep pace with the increased demand for dental services, however. Productivity increases from new technology, as well as the tendency to assign more tasks to dental hygienists and assistants, will allow dentists to perform more work than they have in the past. As their practices expand, dentists are likely to hire more hygienists and dental assistants to handle routine services.

Dentists will increasingly provide care and instruction aimed at preventing the loss of teeth, rather than simply providing treatments such as fillings. Improvements in dental technology also will allow dentists to offer more effective and less painful treatment to their patients.

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.

Demand for dental services tends to follow the business cycle, primarily because these services usually are paid for either by the patient or by private insurance companies. As a result, during slow times in the economy, demand for dental services can decrease; consequently, dentists may have difficulty finding employment, or if already in an established practice, they may work fewer hours because of reduced demand.

State and National Wages

Location	Pay Period	2021		
		Low	Median	High
United States	Hourly	\$46.13	\$100.00+	\$100,000+
	Annual	\$95,940	\$208,000+	\$208,000+
Illinois	Hourly	-	-	-
	Annual	-	-	-

State and National Trends

United States	Employment		Percent Change	Job Openings ¹
	2021	2031		
Orthodontists	6,000	6,300	5%	200
Illinois	Employment		Percent Change	Job Openings ¹
	2020	2030		
Orthodontists	440	480	+9%	20

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

Professional Organizations

American Association of Orthodontists (aaomembers.org)

References

Occupational Outlook Handbook, U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics
(<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/dentists.htm>)

O*NET OnLine (<http://online.onetcenter.org/link/details/29-1023.00>)

Last Modified: November 1, 2022