



Dental Assistants

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Summary

Summary

Quick Facts: Dental Assistants	
2019 Median Pay	\$40,080 per year \$19.27 per hour
Typical Entry-Level Education	Postsecondary nondegree award
Work Experience in a Related Occupation	None
On-the-job Training	None
Number of Jobs, 2019	354,600
Job Outlook, 2019-29	7% (Faster than average)
Employment Change, 2019-29	23,400



[What Dental Assistants Do](#)

Dental assistants provide patient care, take x rays, keep records, and schedule appointments.

[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 an exam. In other states, there are no formal educational requirements, and dental assistants learn through on-the-job training.

[Pay](#)

The median annual wage for dental assistants was \$40,080 in May 2019.

[Job Outlook](#)

Employment of dental assistants is projected to grow 7 percent from 2019 to 2029, faster than the average for all occupations. The aging population and ongoing research linking oral health and general health will lead to continued increases in the demand for preventive dental services.

[State & Area Data](#)

Explore resources for employment and wages by state and area for dental assistants.

[Similar Occupations](#)

Compare the job duties, education, job growth, and pay of dental assistants with similar occupations.

[More Information, Including Links to O*NET](#)

Learn more about dental assistants by visiting additional resources, including O*NET, a source on key characteristics of workers and occupations.

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What They Do

What Dental Assistants Do

About this section

Dental assistants have many tasks, including patient care, recordkeeping, and appointment scheduling. Their duties vary by state and by the dentists' offices in which they work.

Duties

Dental assistants typically do the following:

- Ensure that patients are comfortable in the dental chair
- Prepare patients and the work area for treatments and procedures
- Sterilize dental instruments
- Hand instruments to dentists during procedures
- Dry patients' mouths 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

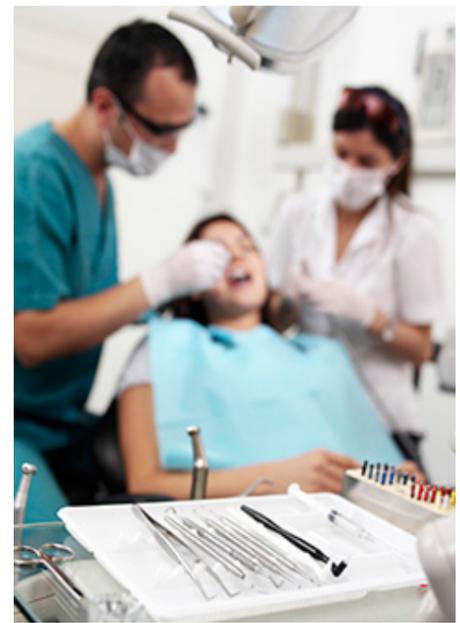
- Work with patients on billing and payment

Dental assistants often spend much of their day working closely with patients and [dentists](#). For example, dental assistants might take a patient's medical history, blood pressure, and pulse before a procedure; explain what will be done; and talk to patients about oral care. They help dentists during a procedure by passing instruments and holding equipment such as suction hoses, matrix bands, and dental curing lights. Other tasks include preparing the treatment room and making sure that instruments and equipment are sterile. Dental assistants also may document the procedure that is done and schedule followup appointments.

Some dental assistants are specially trained to take x rays of teeth and the surrounding areas. They place a protective apron over patients' chest and lap, position the x-ray machine, place the x-ray sensor or film in patients' mouths, and take the x rays. Afterward, dental assistants ensure that the images are clear.

Assistants who perform lab tasks, such as taking impressions of a patient's teeth, work under the direction of a dentist. They may prepare materials for dental impressions or temporary crowns.

Each state regulates the scope of practice for dental assistants. Some states let dental assistants polish teeth to remove stains and plaque from the enamel or apply sealants, fluoride, or topical anesthetic.



Assistants prepare and organize tools needed by dentists to work on a patient.

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Work Environment

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Work Environment

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Dental assistants held about 354,600 jobs in 2019. The largest employers of dental assistants were as follows:

Offices of dentists	90%
Offices of physicians	2
Government	2

Dental assistants work under the supervision of [dentists](#) and 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 also must follow safety procedures to minimize risks associated with x-ray machines.



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

Work Schedules

Most dental assistants work full time. Some work evenings or weekends.

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How to Become One

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How to Become a Dental Assistant

[About this section](#)

There are several possible paths to becoming a dental assistant. Some states require assistants to graduate from an accredited program and pass an exam. In other states, there are no formal educational requirements, and dental assistants learn through on-the-job training.

Education

Some states require dental assistants to graduate from an accredited program and pass an exam. Most programs are offered by community colleges, although they also may be offered by vocational or technical schools.

Many dental assisting programs take about 1 year to complete and lead to a certificate or diploma. Programs that last 2 years are less common and lead to an associate's degree. The [Commission on Dental Accreditation](#) (CODA), part of the American Dental Association, accredits about 250 dental assisting training programs.

Accredited programs include classroom and laboratory work. 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.

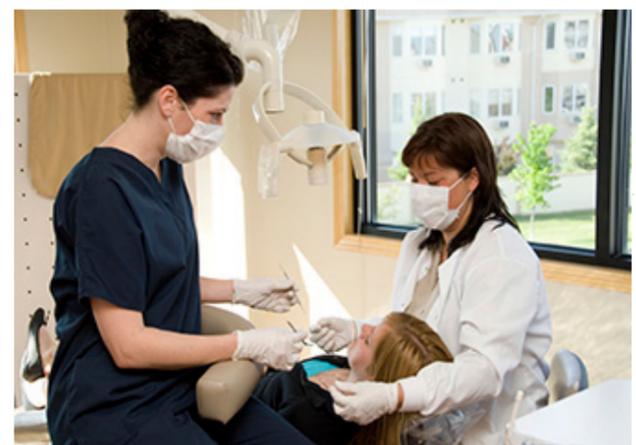
High school students interested in a career as a dental assistant should take courses in anatomy, biology, and chemistry.

Training

Dental assistants who do not have formal education in dental assisting may learn their duties through on-the-job training. In the office, a dental hygienist, dentist, or experienced dental assistant 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, such as infection control procedures, when helping dentists treat patients.



Sometimes, patients are in extreme pain and/or mental distress, so the assistant should be sensitive to their emotions.

Dexterity. Dental assistants must be good at working with their hands. They generally work in tight spaces on a small part of the body, using precise tools and instruments.

Interpersonal skills. Dental assistants work closely with dentists. They also must be considerate in working with patients who are sensitive to pain or have a fear of undergoing dental treatment.

Listening skills. Dental assistants must pay attention 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 x rays.

Organizational skills. Dental assistants should have excellent organizational skills. They need to have the correct tools in place for a dentist or dental hygienist to use when treating a patient, and they need to maintain patient schedules and office records.

Licenses, Certifications, and Registrations

States typically do not require licenses for entry-level dental assistants. Some states require dental assistants to be licensed, registered, or certified for entry or advancement. For example, states may require assistants to meet specific licensing requirements in order to work in radiography (x ray), infection control, or other specialties. For specific requirements, contact your state's Board of Dental Examiners.

States that allow assistants to perform expanded duties, such as coronal polishing, require that they be licensed, registered, or hold certifications from the [Dental Assisting National Board](#) (DANB). To earn certification from DANB, applicants must pass an exam. The educational requirements for DANB certification are that dental assistants must either have graduated from an accredited program or have a high school diploma and complete the required amount of work experience. Applicants also must have current certification in CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation).

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Pay

Pay

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The median annual wage for dental assistants was \$40,080 in May 2019. 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 \$27,980, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$56,930.

In May 2019, the median annual wages for dental assistants in the top industries in which they worked were as follows:

Government	\$42,960
Offices of dentists	40,120
Offices of physicians	37,570

Most dental assistants work full time. Some work evenings or weekends.

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Job Outlook

Job Outlook

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Employment of dental assistants is projected to grow 7 percent from 2019 to 2029, 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 dental assistants to complete routine tasks, allowing dentists to work more efficiently. 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 lead to continued increases in the need for dental care.

Employment projections data for dental assistants, 2019-29

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2019	Projected Employment, 2029	Change, 2019-29		Employment by Industry
				Percent	Numeric	
Dental assistants	31-9091	354,600	378,000	7	23,400	Get data

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections program

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State & Area Data

Dental Assistants

Median annual wages, May 2019

Dental assistants	\$40,080
Total, all occupations	\$39,810
Other healthcare support occupations	\$35,860

Note: All Occupations includes all occupations in the U.S. Economy.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics

Dental Assistants

Percent change in employment, projected 2019-29

Other healthcare support occupations	14%
Dental assistants	7%
Total, all occupations	4%

Note: All Occupations includes all occupations in the U.S. Economy.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections program

State & Area Data

Occupational Employment Statistics (OES)

The [Occupational Employment Statistics](#) (OES) program produces employment and wage estimates annually for over 800 occupations. These estimates are available for the nation as a whole, for individual states, and for metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas. The link(s) below go to OES data maps for employment and wages by state and area.

- [Dental assistants](#)

Projections Central

Occupational employment projections are developed for all states by Labor Market Information (LMI) or individual state Employment Projections offices. All state projections data are available at www.projectionscentral.com. Information on this site allows projected employment growth for an occupation to be compared among states or to be compared within one state. In addition, states may produce projections for areas; there are links to each state's websites where these data may be retrieved.

CareerOneStop

CareerOneStop includes hundreds of [occupational profiles](#) with data available by state and metro area. There are links in the left-hand side menu to compare occupational employment by state and occupational wages by local area or metro area. There is also a [salary info tool](#) to search for wages by zip code.

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Similar Occupations

Similar Occupations

About this section

This table shows a list of occupations with job duties that are similar to those of dental assistants.

	OCCUPATION	JOB DUTIES	ENTRY-LEVEL EDUCATION 	2019 MEDIAN PAY 
	Dental and Ophthalmic Laboratory Technicians and Medical Appliance Technicians	Dental and ophthalmic laboratory technicians and medical appliance technicians construct, fit, or repair medical appliances and devices.	High school diploma or equivalent	\$37,370
	Dental Hygienists	Dental hygienists examine patients for signs of oral diseases, such as gingivitis, and provide preventive care, including oral hygiene.	Associate's degree	\$76,220
	Dentists	Dentists diagnose and treat problems with patients' teeth, gums, and related parts of the mouth.	Doctoral or professional degree	\$159,200
	Medical Assistants	Medical assistants complete administrative and clinical tasks in hospitals, offices of physicians, and other healthcare facilities.	Postsecondary nondegree award	\$34,800
	Occupational Therapy Assistants and Aides	Occupational therapy assistants and aides help patients develop, recover, improve, as well as maintain the skills needed for daily living and working.	See How to Become One	\$59,200
	Pharmacy Technicians	Pharmacy technicians help pharmacists dispense prescription medication to customers or health professionals.	High school diploma or equivalent	\$33,950
	Phlebotomists	Phlebotomists draw blood for tests, transfusions, research, or blood donations.	Postsecondary nondegree award	\$35,510
	Physical Therapist Assistants and Aides	Physical therapist assistants and aides are supervised by physical therapists to help patients regain movement and manage pain after injuries and illnesses.	See How to Become One	\$48,990
	Surgical Technologists	Surgical technologists assist in surgical operations.	Postsecondary nondegree award	\$48,300
	Veterinary Assistants and Laboratory Animal Caretakers	Veterinary assistants and laboratory animal caretakers handle routine animal care and help scientists, veterinarians , and others with their daily tasks.	High school diploma or equivalent	\$28,590

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More Info

Contacts for More Information

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For more information about becoming a dental assistant and for a list of accredited dental assistant programs, visit

[American Dental Assistants Association](#)

[Commission on Dental Accreditation, American Dental Association](#)

For more information about becoming a Certified Dental Assistant and for a list of state boards of dentistry, visit

[Dental Assisting National Board, Inc.](#)

O*NET

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SUGGESTED CITATION:

Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook, Dental Assistants,
at <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/dental-assistants.htm> (visited December 16, 2020).

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