

Dental Hygienists:

Advocating more than just good oral hygiene

How their education and community involvement make a difference in your overall health

Most of us visit our dentist and dental hygienist twice a year for a checkup and cleaning, but did you know that dental hygienists do much more than clean teeth? In honor of National Dental Hygiene Month, UnitedHealthcare Dental features dental hygienists and the difference they make in the lives of their patients every day.



What is a dental hygienist?

Dental hygienists are licensed oral health professionals who focus on preventing and treating oral diseases, protecting teeth and gums, and caring for patients' total health. They are graduates of accredited dental hygiene education programs at universities, and must pass a written national board examination and a clinical examination before they are licensed to practice. In addition to treating patients directly, dental hygienists may also work as educators, researchers and administrators.

Hygienists provide a range of services based on their skill and education, such as the following:

- Review patients' health history, dental charting, oral cancer screening and evaluation of gum disease/health
- Expose, process and interpret dental X-rays
- Remove plaque and calculus (tartar) from above and below the gum line
- Apply cavity-preventive agents such as fluorides and sealants to the teeth
- Administer local anesthetic or nitrous oxide analgesia
- Educate patients on proper oral hygiene techniques and good nutrition to maintain healthy teeth and gums
- Counsel patients on smoking cessation

In addition to working in private practices, dental hygienists also practice in schools, public health clinics, hospitals, managed care organizations, correctional institutions, nursing homes and corporate environments.

Dental hygiene education

Education for dental hygiene has a long tradition going back to Dr. Alfred Fones of Bridgeport, Connecticut, who founded the first school of dental hygiene in 1913, which is still in operation today. Becoming a dental hygienist requires a high school diploma, with all completed prerequisites, including the sciences, and possibly a demonstration of good manual dexterity. Dental hygiene education is rigorous, according to the American Dental Hygienists' Association (ADHA), requiring a minimum of 1,948 hours of education. Dental hygiene schools offer certificates, associate degrees or a bachelor's degree, depending on the length of the program. Master's degrees are also available for those wishing to enter teaching or administration. No matter which degree path a hygiene student chooses to pursue, the core curriculum contains common elements including:

- General education courses including English, speech, psychology and sociology
- Basic science courses including general chemistry, anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, microbiology, pathology, nutrition and pharmacology
- Dental science courses including dental anatomy, head and neck anatomy, oral embryology and histology, oral pathology, radiography, periodontology, pain control and dental materials
- Dental hygiene science courses including oral health education and preventive counseling, patient management, clinical dental hygiene, community dental health, medical and dental emergencies including basic life support, and legal and ethical aspects of dental hygiene practice
- Supervised instruction in pre-clinical and clinical practice

Public health and research

While most hygienists enter private practice, many are also involved with public health or research. The ADHA notes that hygienists play an important role as advocates in the following areas:

- Development of community-based comprehensive oral health programs
- Community water fluoridation and school-based dental sealant programs
- Incorporation of oral health in all aspects of health programs in schools, including school-based dental programs for children most at risk for untreated dental decay
- Adequate funding for prevention and treatment programs designed to improve oral health among under served sectors of the population
- Use of dental hygienists in community health education

Hygienists are also heavily involved in research. The *National Dental Research Hygiene Agenda*, published by the ADHA, notes the following general areas of dental hygiene research:

- Health Promotion/Disease Prevention
- Health Services Research
- Professional Education and Development
- Clinical Dental Hygiene
- Occupational Health and Safety

The future of dental hygiene

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, dental hygiene will be one of the fastest growing professions in the United States. With growing concerns about a declining dentist to population ratio, and increasing levels of poor and uninsured individuals, dental hygienists will continue to have an important role to play in improving access to care and providing much needed preventive services. The nature of that role will be the focal point of ongoing discussions between the dental hygiene and dental professions, as well as policy makers and legislators.

Dental hygienists will continue to play a valuable role working alongside dentists and providing professional preventive services, as well as education on topics including the link between oral health and overall health and preventive health for pregnant patients. They also provide expertise for helping those who are medically compromised, such as patients with diabetes, and safeguarding against traumatic injury.

Whatever their specific role, dental hygienists, well-educated and experienced, are an integral member of the dental team, helping patients improve both their oral and overall health. During this National Dental Hygienist Month, be sure to congratulate your dental hygienist and let them know how much you appreciate their efforts. From all of us at UnitedHealthcare Dental, we also extend our deepest thanks to all dental hygienists for all they do for you and the community.

Sources

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