

Healthcare Support

Dental Assistants

Dental Assistants perform a variety of patient care, office, and laboratory duties. They sterilize and disinfect instruments and equipment, prepare and lay out the instruments and materials required to treat each patient, and obtain and update patients' dental records. Assistants make patients comfortable in the dental chair and prepare them for treatment. During dental procedures, assistants work alongside the dentist to provide assistance. They hand instruments and materials to dentists and keep patients' mouths dry and clear by using suction hoses or other devices. They also instruct patients on post-operative and general oral healthcare.

Dental assistants may prepare materials for impressions and restorations, and process dental x-rays as directed by a dentist. They may remove sutures, apply topical anesthetics to gums or cavity-preventive agents to teeth, remove excess cement used in the filling process, and place dental dams to isolate teeth for treatment. Many states are expanding dental assistants' duties to include tasks such as coronal polishing and restorative dentistry functions for those assistants who meet specific training and experience requirements.

Dental assistants with laboratory duties make casts of the teeth and mouth from impressions, clean and polish removable appliances, and make temporary crowns. Those with office duties schedule and confirm appointments, receive patients, keep treatment records, send bills, receive payments, and order dental supplies and materials.

Dental assistants must work closely with, and under the supervision of, dentists. Additionally, dental assistants should not be confused with dental hygienists, who are licensed to perform a different set of clinical tasks.

Dental assistants work in well-lighted, clean environments, generally for 40 hours a week. Their work area is usually near the dental chair so that they can arrange instruments, materials, and medication and hand them to the dentist when needed. Dental assistants must wear gloves, masks, eyewear, and protective clothing to protect themselves and their patients from infectious diseases. They must follow safety procedures in order to minimize the risks associated with the use of x-ray machines.

Education/ Training

How to Obtain:

The requirements to become a dental assistant vary by state but most states do not require any formal education or training program. In this situation, dental assistants are

trained through on-the-job training by their employing dentist or other dental assistants in dental terminology, the names of instruments, and other daily duties.

Those who desire to perform more advanced functions, such as performing radiologic procedures, can go through a program accredited by the Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA). Most programs take 1 year to complete and result in a certificate or diploma. Two year programs resulting in an associate degree are available at community colleges.

The duties that dental assistants can perform vary by state and some states require licensure or registration as a dental assistant to perform expanded functions or radiological procedures in a dental office.

The Certified Dental Assistant (CDA) credential can be obtained through the Dental Assisting National Board (DANB). To qualify for licensure the DANB candidates must:

- Graduate from an accredited CODA dental assisting program **OR**
- Have 2 years of full time **OR** 4 years of part time experience as a dental assistant
- Have current certification in CPR
- Earn continuing education credits every year for recertification

In New York State, a certified dental assistant must meet the following requirements:

- Pay the CDA registration fee (\$103)
- At least 17 years of age
- Complete a state-licensed educational program or its equivalent
- Pass the three components of the Dental Assisting National Board (DANB) examination. The three components are: radiation health and safety, infection control, and general chair-side. (Note: Applicants can opt out of one or more components of this examination if he/she has 3 - 4 years of experience certified by an employer.)

More Information on Licensing and Certification:

- American Association of Dental Boards:
<http://www.dentalboards.org/>
- Dental Assisting National Board (DANB):
<http://www.danb.org/>
- Dental Assisting National Board State Specific Information:
<http://www.danb.org/main/statespecificinfo.asp>
- New York State Education Department- Dentistry:
<http://www.op.nysed.gov/prof/dent/dentcdalic.htm>

- Dental Assisting National Board Functions List:
<http://www.danb.org/PDFs/Charts/NewYork.pdf>
- New York State Education Department Inventory of Registered Programs:
<http://www.nysed.gov/heds/IRPSL1.html>

Average Costs:

New York for a CDA license registration fee: \$103.

Each of the three components of the DANB examination cost \$150 dollars for a total of \$450 in examination fees, plus the cost of exam study aids. Cost may vary if an applicant registers and takes certain components together at a discounted rate or if an applicant is eligible to opt out of one or more of the components.

Costs of professional development/continuing education vary.

Note: These figures do not include federal, state, or university financial aid resources such as grants, fellowships, scholarships or work study. They also do not include vocational rehabilitation or other state resources available specifically to people with disabilities. The out-of-pocket expense may be significantly less.