

COVID-19 Considerations for Dental Hygienists

The presence of COVID-19 in communities across the world in 2020 provides a new dimension of risk and increases the complexity of providing dental care and services. Additional risks in dental hygiene practice related to COVID-19 are emerging as this pandemic continues to grow.

At the start of the pandemic. Detailed guidance related to provision of dental care and services to patients suspected to be infected and those not known to be infected have been outlined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). As suggested in the documents posted at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/dental-settings.html>, dentists and dental hygienists should remain apprised of ongoing changes from the CDC, state dental board, and other regulatory entities related to the COVID-19 impact on care.

Dental Practice Recovery and Re-opening.

Dentists and dental hygienists should remain aware of recommended practices that are likely to change over time related to the prevention of COVID-19 transmission. Reducing COVID-19 risk by promoting patient and staff safety will change many processes and practices in the typical dental setting. In preparation for re-opening dental practices following the initial phase of COVID-19, the American Dental Hygienists' Association (ADHA) and the American Dental Association (ADA), in collaboration with the CDC, and others, have assembled toolkits to assist hygienists and dentists.

The ADHA Return to Work Guide for dental hygienists can be found at https://www.adha.org/resources-docs/ADHA_TaskForceReport.pdf. The **ADHA Interim Guidance on Returning to Work** (*Version Aug 5, 2020*) begins outlines requirements for screening of staff and patients, cleaning procedures, and alteration in care processes to decrease direct human interaction whenever possible (waiting rooms, check-in) and to reduce aerosol-producing procedures. With states re-opening services at varying times and with varying guidance, the ADHA return to work interim guidance provides clear direction regarding safe practices "to ensure the health and safety of the individuals they serve and the team members with whom they interact". Mask, face shields and other PPE use, disinfection, and practice changes to avoid aerosol production are described, including reduced use of ultrasonic and air polishing procedures. A comprehensive patient screening tool and a return to work checklist is included with the ADHA recommendations. Of note, if the pandemic worsens, dental practices are advised to prioritize those most in need of care if limitations on PPE or other circumstances reduce safety for the dental care team.

The **ADA Return to Work Interim Guidance Toolkit** (*Version July 23, 2020*) is available at https://success.ada.org/~media/CPS/Files/Open%20Files/ADA_Return_to_Work_Toolkit.pdf.

Directives, resource links, checklists and sample resource tools are available for your use. States and local areas may allow elective dental care to be performed at varying times based on state and local COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and other related directives. Patient and staff screening, use of personal protective equipment, communication with patients, environmental cleaning and other COVID-19 spread prevention strategies comprise some of the informational support provided.

Dental hygienists should pay particular attention to the ADA toolkit information contained in the **chairside checklist and interim guidance for face mask use and other PPE**. As more is learned about COVID-19 and the pandemic continues to evolve, dentists and dental hygienists will need to stay informed on revised guidelines and directives from the ADHA, the CDC and the ADA as they become available. Dental hygienists should work with the dentists and practice leaders in the locations in which they work to promote safety for patients and all dental staff.

Resources

American Dental Association (ADA). (June 9, 2020). ADA Return to Work Interim Guidance Toolkit. https://success.ada.org/~media/CPS/Files/Open%20Files/ADA_Return_to_Work_Toolkit.pdf accessed on March 15, 2021.

American Dental Hygienists' Association (ADHA). (June 18, 2020). ADHA Interim Guidance on Returning to Work https://www.adha.org/resources-docs/ADHA_TaskForceReport.pdf on March 15, 2021.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (Updated June 17, 2020). Dental Settings: Interim Infection Prevention and Control Guidance for Dental Settings During the COVID-19 Response. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/dental-settings.html> accessed on March 15, 2021.