

DENTAL ASSISTING FACT SHEET

Nature of the Work

Dental assistants perform a variety of patient care, office and laboratory duties. They work at chairside as a dentist examines and treats patients. They make patients as comfortable as possible in the dental chair, prepare them for treatment, and obtain dental records. Assistants hand instruments and materials to the dentist, and keep patients mouths dry and clear by using suction or other devices. Assistants also sterilize and disinfect instruments and equipment, prepare tray setups for dental procedures, and instruct patients on post-operative and general oral health care.

Some dental assistants prepare materials for making impressions and restorations, expose radiographs, and process dental x-ray film as directed by a dentist. They may also remove sutures, apply topical anesthetic and cavity preventing agents to teeth and gums, and place rubber dams on teeth to isolate them for individual treatment. In Illinois, dental assistants can polish teeth, place sealants and monitor the administration of nitrous oxide after specialized training.

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

Dental assistants should not be confused with dental hygienists.

Dental Assisting Economics

- The salary of a dental assistant varies, depending upon the responsibilities associated with the specific position and the geographic location of employment.
- According to DANB's Salary Survey, full-time DANB Certified Dental Assistant (CDA) certificants earn a median salary of \$20.46 an hour, nearly \$2 more per hour than non-certified dental assistants.
- According to the same survey, CDA certificants receive numerous other benefits including paid holidays, paid vacation, 401(k) or pension plans, free dental care and paid sick leave.
- Beyond monetary rewards, those surveyed reported that certification benefited them personally and professionally — including greater pride, increased knowledge, greater confidence, and standing out from others when applying for a job.
- DANB certificants report high levels of career satisfaction. In fact, 99% of those surveyed plan to renew their certification!
- Earning DANB certification can be a career boost, especially for those who are trying to stand out when applying for a new job. Of those surveyed, 96% would encourage others to earn DANB certification!
- The Illinois Department of Employment Security states that dental assistants in Bureau, LaSalle, Lee and Putnam counties have mean salaries of \$39,770 annually or \$19/hour.
- There is evidence that dental assistants who have completed a formal training program or are employed in states that require certification or registration receive higher salaries. American Dental Association reported in 2018 that a certified dental assistant earns on average \$2.38 more per hour than a non-certified dental assistant.

Dental Assisting Education

- Formal college-level education is encouraged; however, dental assistants can begin their careers without a college degree.
- “The American Dental Association’s Commission on Dental Accreditation approved 251 dental assisting training programs in 2010. Programs include classroom, laboratory, and preclinical instruction in dental assisting skills

and related theory. In addition, students gain practical experience in dental schools, clinics, or dental offices. Most programs take 1 year or less to complete and lead to a certificate or diploma.” (Service Occupations-Dental Assistant, 2012) Five of those schools are in Illinois.

- “Certification is available through the Dental Assisting National Board. Certification is an acknowledgment of an assistant’s qualifications and professional competence, and may be an asset when seeking employment. In several states that have adopted standards for dental assistants who perform radiological procedures, completion of the certification examination meets those standards. Candidates may qualify to take the certification examination by graduating from an accredited training program, or by having two years of full-time experience as a dental assistant. In addition, applicants must have current certification in cardiopulmonary resuscitation.” (Service Occupations-Dental Assistant, 2012)
- There are excellent career opportunities for “nontraditional” dental assisting students. These individuals, who don’t fit the usual profile of the dental assisting student, might meet one or more of the following criteria: more than 23 years of age; individuals seeking career change or job re-entry after a period of unemployment; or individual’s with culturally diverse backgrounds. Many dental assisting education programs offer more flexible program designs that meet the needs of “nontraditional” students by offering a variety of educational options, such as part-time or evening hours.

Dental Assisting Tomorrow

- The demand for dental services will continue to grow. Due the success of preventative dentistry in reducing the incidence of oral disease, the growing older population will retain their teeth longer, and will be even more aware of the importance of regular dental care. Dentists will need to employ more dental assistants than ever before to meet the increased demands for dental services.
- Older dentists, who are less likely to employ assistants, will retire and be replaced by recent graduates who are more likely to have two dental assistants. The new generation of Dentists is likely to employ assistants to perform more tasks, thus increasing production.
- “Population growth and greater retention of natural teeth by middle-aged and older people will fuel demand for dental services, and create opportunities for dental assistants.” (Service Occupations-Dental Assistant, 2012)