Dental Hygienist

At a Glance

Dental hygienists help maintain the dental health of their patients and educate them about proper oral hygiene.

Search by Cluster
Medical & Health

Earnings

Typical Earnings Range: 55K - 73K

Level of Education
- Community College or Technical Training

Core Tasks
- Examine teeth and gums visually and with x-rays to find tooth decay and gum disease
- Report problems to the dentist
- Scrape hard built-up material off teeth
- Polish patients' teeth
- Give advice on preventive dental care

Attributes & Abilities
- Good with people
- Able to calm people who are scared or in pain
- Concern for people's well-being
- Hand-eye coordination
- Work well with your hands

Workplace
- Most work in dental offices
- Some work for large organizations like hospitals, the Armed Forces, and dental hygiene schools and universities
- Usually work 7 to 8 hours a day, 5 days a week
- Often work evenings and weekends

Job Description

Although people might not always look forward to seeing a dental professional, regular check-ups can save them a lot of pain and trouble down the road. In fact, because of the efforts of dental hygienists, many patients are able to avoid unpleasant dental procedures like root canals and fillings.

Dental hygienists are specially trained health care professionals who help maintain the dental health of their patients and prevent oral health problems. They also educate patients about proper oral hygiene habits and techniques. Ideally, hygienists see each patient for a routine appointment every 6 months.

Hygienists begin an appointment by assessing the condition of the patient's teeth and gums. They look for a wide variety of oral health problems. The most common are tooth decay and gingivitis or gum disease. A small mirror and a probe are used to check the patient's teeth and gums for indicators of trouble, such as cavities and
red or swollen gums. This process requires a steady hand and a careful eye.

Typically, hygienists can't get enough information about patients' dental health from a visual examination, so they also take x-rays of patients' teeth. X-rays reveal tooth decay that can't be seen by a visual inspection. They also reveal any dental problems that may exist beneath the surface of the gums.

Once the exam is finished, the hygienist discusses any oral health problems that were found and shows the patient proper dental care techniques that will help prevent future problems. The hygienist also reports the problem to the dentist, who will follow up with treatment.

Next, the hygienist cleans the patient's teeth. The most common cleaning procedure is scaling, which involves scraping teeth with a sharp, flat-bladed instrument to remove hard material built up on teeth. The hygienist then polishes the patient's teeth to remove stains and smooth the surface of the teeth.

Other preventative procedures that the hygienist frequently performs include fluoride treatments and the application of clear plastic protective coatings, known as sealant, to patients' teeth.

In addition to examining and treating patients, hygienists are responsible for maintaining patients' dental health records.

**Working Conditions**

Most dental hygienists work in dental offices. They are supervised indirectly by dentists and they may be responsible for overseeing the work of one or more dental assistants.

Other dental hygienists are employed by hospitals, retirement homes, research labs, health units of large companies, the Armed Forces, pharmaceutical or dental supply companies, or dental hygiene schools.

The job can be physically demanding on hygienists' backs, shoulders, and necks since they are bent over while working on patients. Repetitive hand motions while working can lead to overuse or repetitive strain injuries.

The workday for the vast majority of dental hygienists is between 7 and 8 hours. Overtime work is fairly rare.

The number of days that hygienists work each week varies depending on the place of employment. Part-time hygienists may work as few as 1 or 2 days each week, while full-time hygienists usually work 5 days a week. Not many dental offices are open on weekends, but hygienists who work in one of these offices may be expected to work on Saturdays.

Most dental hygienists work between 20 and 40 hours a week.

**Earnings**

Earnings for hygienists can vary a great deal depending on level of education, geographic location, experience, and their responsibilities at work. Hygienists may be paid on an hourly, daily, yearly, or commission basis.

The hourly wages earned by dental hygienists often range between $30 and $40. However, wages can vary widely. Some entry-level hygienists earn less than $20 an hour, and those with a high level of education and many years of experience can make upwards of $60 an hour in some regions.

Annual earnings depend on the rate of pay and the number of hours worked. For those who work full-time, 35-hour weeks, typical annual earnings range between $55,000 and $73,000. However, many hygienists work fewer than 35 hours a week.

**Education**

Diploma and degree programs in dental hygiene are offered at colleges and universities across Canada.
Entrance requirements vary from program to program, but all require at least a high school diploma and some require at least 1 year of university studies.

Most programs last between 2 and 4 years, and include hands-on experience working as a dental hygienist. Programs focus on the basic sciences such as chemistry and biology, dental sciences, clinical sciences, and behavioural sciences (psychology and sociology).

After completing the required education, graduates must be registered with or obtain a licence to practise from their province’s dental hygiene regulatory association. In most provinces, this involves the completion of a special exam administered by the National Dental Hygiene Certification Board (NDHCB).

Hygienists can also pursue additional education and training that will allow them to perform more advanced tasks such as administering local anesthetics. Continuing education courses are required in some provinces to maintain licensure.

Related College & University Programs

- Dental Hygiene
- Dental Assisting
- Dental Laboratory Technology

Other Suggested Qualifications

Try to get part-time or summer jobs that involve frequent interaction with the public. This will allow you to develop your interpersonal skills. Hygienists should also be able to soothe nervous patients’ nerves, and help them to remain comfortable and calm during treatment. You should work well with others and have good manual dexterity because there is little room for error when using sharp dental instruments.

Suggested High School Subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade 9</th>
<th>Grade 10</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Science</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creative Arts</td>
<td>Personal &amp; Career Development</td>
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<td>Business</td>
<td>Business</td>
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<td>French</td>
<td>Health &amp; Physical Education</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Grade 11</th>
<th>Grade 12</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
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<td>Physics</td>
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<td>Business &amp; Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health &amp; Physical Education</td>
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Important

- Check with your advisor to make sure that your course selections satisfy your graduation requirements.
- Courses available may vary from school to school.

Sample Career Path
People take different pathways through their careers, but no one starts at the top. This is an example of how the earnings, education and experience requirements, and responsibilities might progress for someone in this occupation.

### Level 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Title</th>
<th>Dental Assistant</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Earnings</td>
<td>$14 to $25 an hour</td>
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</table>
| Requirements   | • High school diploma  
                  • Certificate in dental assisting |
| Responsibilities | Cleaning and preparing instruments for dentists and hygienists; getting patients ready for treatment; recording observations made by dentists and hygienists; helping dentists and hygienists perform procedures such as administering fluoride treatment or filling a cavity. |

### Level 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Title</th>
<th>Dental Hygienist</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Earnings</td>
<td>$40,000 to $70,000 a year</td>
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</table>
| Requirements   | • Diploma or degree in dental hygiene  
                  • Possibly experience as a dental assistant  
                  • Pass dental hygiene licensing exam |
| Responsibilities | Scaling (removing plaque and tartar from teeth); teaching patients proper oral hygiene; taking x-rays; checking for cavities; administering fluoride treatments; polishing teeth; assessing gums; applying plastic sealants to teeth. |

### Level 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Title</th>
<th>Senior Dental Hygienist</th>
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<tr>
<td>Earnings</td>
<td>$50,000 to $100,000 a year</td>
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<tr>
<td>Requirements</td>
<td>• Trained to carry out advanced duties and procedures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Responsibilities</td>
<td>Scaling (removing plaque and tartar from teeth); teaching patients proper oral hygiene; taking x-rays; checking for cavities; administering fluoride treatments; polishing teeth; assessing gums; placing fillings; applying plastic sealants to teeth; polishing fillings; possibly administering local anesthetics.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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### Related Careers

Here are some other occupations that you might be interested in. Click on an occupation name to learn more.
Career Clusters

Career Clusters are groups or families of occupations that share common characteristics such as knowledge requirements, skill sets, and/or goals.

Medical & Health

National Occupational Classification

NOC Code: 3222

Other Resources

**Canadian Dental Hygienists Association (CDHA)**
http://www.cdha.ca
The site for this organization includes links to provincial dental hygienist associations and other interesting sites. Be sure to explore the Career section.

**Canadian Dental Association (CDA)**
http://www.cda-adc.ca
This is a national industry website for all dentistry professionals in Canada. See The Dental Profession section for information about this field, and check out the Your Oral Health section.

**National Dental Hygiene Certification Board (NDHCB)**
http://www.ndhcb.ca
The NDHCB oversees and sets the certification requirements for the dental hygiene profession in Canada. Visit this site for information on the examination process.

**Heading for Success**
http://www.headingforsuccess.com
This Government of Quebec website focuses on careers requiring vocational or technical training. Scroll over Find A Career By Category to explore careers in a variety of fields.

**ToothCareers.Com (US)**
http://www.toothcareers.com
A website developed by the University of Minnesota that aims to inform students about careers in dentistry.

**Human Resources and Skills Development Canada - Essential Skills**
Dental Hygienists

Ontario Skills Passport
Dental Hygienists
http://www.skills.edu.gov.on.ca/OSP2Web/EDU/DisplayNocDetails.xhtml?nocid=3222