



What Is a Dental Hygienist?

Dental hygienists are licensed oral health professionals who focus on preventing and treating oral diseases-both to protect teeth and gums, and also to protect patients' total health. They are graduates of accredited dental hygiene education programs in colleges and universities, and must take 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.

What Do Dental Hygienists Do?

Each state has its own specific regulations and the range of services performed by dental hygienists varies from one state to another. As part of dental hygiene services, dental hygienists may:

- perform oral health care assessments that include the review of patients' health history, dental charting, oral cancer screening, and evaluation of gum disease / health;
- expose, process, and interpret dental radiographs (x-rays);
- remove plaque and calculus ("tartar") from above and below the gumline using dental instruments;
- apply cavity-preventive agents such as fluorides and sealants to the teeth;
- administer local anesthetic and / or nitrous oxide analgesia;
- educate patients on proper oral hygiene techniques to maintain healthy teeth and gums;
- counsel patients about plaque control and developing individualized at-home oral hygiene programs;
- administer smoking cessation programs; and
- counsel patients on the importance of good nutrition for maintaining optimal oral health.

Where Do Dental Hygienists Work?

Clinical dental hygienists may work in a variety of health care settings such as private dental offices, schools, public health clinics, hospitals, managed care organizations, correctional institutions, nursing homes or in a corporate environment. In addition to the clinical role, dental hygienists may also work in an administrative capacity in any of the above locations.

What Does the "RDH" Designation Mean?

The "RDH" means Registered Dental Hygienist. The RDH credential identifies a dental hygienist as a licensed oral health professional. State licensure requirements typically indicate that a dental hygienist must graduate from an accredited dental hygiene education program, successfully pass a [national written examination](#), and a [state or regional clinical examination](#). (In Indiana, the designation LDH [Licensed Dental Hygienist] is used instead of RDH.)

