

What is a hygienist?

Dental hygienists are specially trained to work with the dentist in giving care to patients. They play an important role in dental health care and are mainly concerned with maintaining gum health, showing people correct home care and applying preventative materials to the teeth and gums.

What is the hygienist's role in the practice?

The hygienist's main role is to professionally clean the teeth for the patient. This is usually called scaling and polishing. However, perhaps their most important role is showing the patient the best way to keep the teeth free from plaque. They also give advice on diet and preventing dental decay. The hygienist will work with your dentist to provide care which is tailored to your needs.

How can a visit to a hygienist be useful to me?

Dental hygienists are now able to take dental x-rays. The dentist will use these to help diagnose problems and decide on their possible treatment. All hygienists that take x-rays will have had the necessary training and hold a certificate.

If the dentist suggests that you have fissure sealants treatment, they may refer you to the dental hygienist because it is one of the tasks hygienists have been trained to do.

Does every practice have a hygienist?

Not all practices have a hygienist. However, more of them now offer this as part of the service to patients, using part-time and full time hygienists. Hygienists can now work when a dentist is not there, as long as the patient has been seen by the dentist and the treatment is prescribed for that particular patient.

Why is treatment by a hygienist important?

Regular professional cleaning combined with looking after your teeth and gums well at home will help keep your mouth healthy. A clean and healthy mouth will improve your appearance, help you to keep your teeth and give you fresh breath.

Can a hygienist help prevent dental disease?

This is what training of the hygienist is all about. Carefully removing the hard deposits of calculus (tartar) that build up on the teeth and teaching you how to prevent it reforming, will go a long way to slowing the progress of gum disease.

By discussing your diet and recommending other preventative measures, the rate at which your teeth decay can also be slowed down. Regular visits and advice will help build your confidence in maintaining your oral health and achieving a healthy mouth.

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What other help can be given to adults?

Adults who have a lot of decay can benefit from having fluoride applied. They can also have anti-bacterial gels and solutions applied under the gum to kill the bacteria causing gum disease.

Another very important part of the hygienist's work is giving regular instructions and advice on home care. The hygienist may also suggest giving up smoking, as this will reduce staining. Recent research has also shown that smokers have more gum disease and lose more teeth than non-smokers. Your hygienist will be able to advise you on various ways of giving up smoking.

What help is available for children?

Children can benefit from having their teeth polished. The hygienist can also supply fluoride gels and solutions to help prevent decay.

The permanent back teeth can also benefit from having the biting surface sealed. This is done by applying a special plastic coating to the biting surface soon after they come through. For further information refer to the Foundation's leaflet *Tell Me About Pit And Fissure Sealants*.

What does treatment cost?

Costs of treatment with a dental hygienist vary according to what is being done and from practice to practice. It is important to find out the cost before you start, by getting a written quotation. Practices should have a price list at their reception giving a guide to the prices charged for the service.

What can I do to help the hygienist?

You can do a great deal to help yourself and the hygienist, as you are in control of your mouth between visits to the practice. Your hygienist will have shown you how to remove plaque with a toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste.

You will also have been shown how to clean between your teeth with floss, tape or little brushes. There are many oral care products now available including specialist toothpastes, powered toothbrushes and mouthwashes. Your hygienist will recommend those that are best for you.

We recommend you follow these simple steps to help keep your teeth and gums healthy.

- Brush your teeth for two minutes, twice a day with fluoride toothpaste
- Cut down on how often you have sugary foods and drinks
- Visit your dentist regularly, as often as they recommend.

Cutting down the amount of sugar in your diet, and the number of times that you eat during the day, can help to reduce decay. Your hygienist can help you by looking at your decay problem, your diet and by making some recommendations for you to consider.

Chewing sugar-free gum after meals can also help to prevent tooth decay. Chewing gum makes your mouth produce more saliva, which in turn cancels out the acid produced in your mouth after drinking and eating.