



# Your Career as a Dental Hygienist: Healthcare Professional

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DENTAL HYGIENIST IS ONE OF THE most challenging healthcare careers. It is both physically and emotionally demanding and also requires a high level of intelligence. At the same time, it is a highly rewarding profession, providing the dental hygienist with opportunities to help many children and adults on the path to better health. To excel as a dental hygienist you must have stamina, dexterity, and intense concentration. You must be a skilled visual observer and also a good listener, able to pay attention to detail and sort out the important data. In addition, you must be able to interact well with both colleagues and patients and, with the patients, have the ability to explain what you are doing when treating them and what they need to do to maintain their own dental well-being. This educational aspect of the work is viewed by many dental hygienists as the most important component of their work. In fact, dental hygienists are in some ways the most important health educators with whom many people ever come in contact. Above all, you must have an empathetic nature, understanding that the patients you see are often in pain. You must be able to put them at ease, to the greatest degree possible under the circumstances, and proceed with your work with the utmost delicacy and care. For many patients, the problem is not pain as much as it is fear, not necessarily of you, but of simply being in a dentist's office and in the treatment chair. These patients require your compassion. Their fears may not reflect the reality of the experience, but they are nonetheless real for those patients. This is a career that offers independence, even when working under the auspices of a dental practice. Hygienists work alone, usually in their own treatment rooms. While many states in the US still require that a hygienist work in a dentist's office, in recent years most states and many Canadian provinces have decided to allow them to work out of their own offices, or in clinics or other healthcare settings without the presence of a dentist. Many dental hygienists are extremely excited about these changes. They note that the public in general is strongly in favor of having increased access to healthcare professionals, especially those working with under-served populations. It is a promising development for these communities to have access to easy, convenient, affordable dental care. As these changes take place, the availability of dental hygiene in schools, hospitals, nursing homes, and programs such as Head Start, can lead to a fundamental change in the overall health of the nation, with the cost of dental care reduced because of the preventative work that is being done. All of this makes it a great time to be joining the dental hygiene profession! It is possible that there will be a shortage as the demand for dental hygienists will be high in the coming years. Dental hygienists tend to make more than other healthcare professionals with similar levels of education and responsibilities. Of course, there will be differences from state to state, and between urban and rural regions. Even with the demand, you may not find exactly the right job the first time you look, but with so much happening in the profession, it is a great time to be looking for that perfect fit.

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