

What do dental assistants do?

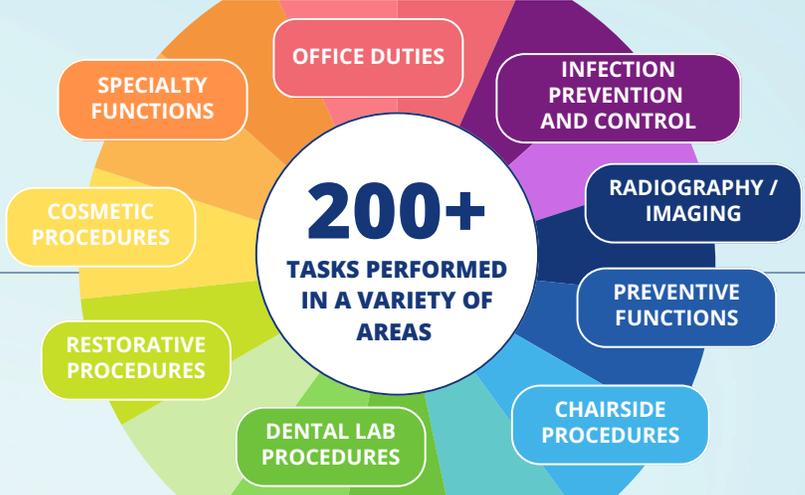


Dental assistants play a key role in delivering high-quality oral healthcare.

- Supporting dentists and the entire dental team
- Guiding patients through their visit, providing information, comfort, and care
- Keeping the practice running smoothly every day

A career in dental assisting is fulfilling, flexible and full of variety.

TASKS PERFORMED



WHERE THEY WORK ¹



ROLE IN DENTISTRY ²

Dental assisting is the largest profession in dentistry



Dental assistants improve practice productivity and patient retention.



CERTIFICATION
DANB is the national certification board for dental assistants, offering the Certified Dental Assistant certification and others. Learn more at www.danb.org.



1. DANB's Dental Assistants Salary and Satisfaction Survey
2. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Occupational Outlook Handbook

What do dental assistants do?

A job analysis report

Summary

Dental assisting is a broad role, and dental assistants are charged with performing more than 200 different tasks. The Dental Assisting National Board (DANB) analyzed the job of the dental assistant through focus groups and surveys to gain a deeper understanding of their work.

The results revealed that dental assistants play a pivotal and wide-ranging role in dental practices, requiring both strong clinical skills as well as exceptional interpersonal skills. The vast scope of responsibilities makes dental assistants indispensable to a practice's success, yet the ongoing shortage of qualified dental assistants has put a strain on practice efficiency and reduced the availability of patient care.

Competitive compensation and career growth opportunities are top factors for retaining dental assistants. Dental practices that invest in their assistants through ongoing training, education, and fair compensation see lower turnover, enhanced productivity, and greater patient satisfaction.

Dental assistants are critical team members in access to care initiatives. Creating pathways to allow more dental assistants to perform preventive and restorative functions at higher compensation levels would help expand patient care, enhance career growth, improve retention, and ease workforce shortages.

Introduction

Dental assisting is a broad role with many responsibilities. In fact, dental assistants perform more than 200 different tasks in their role. DANB sought to analyze the dental assistant role in order to gain a deeper understanding of their work.

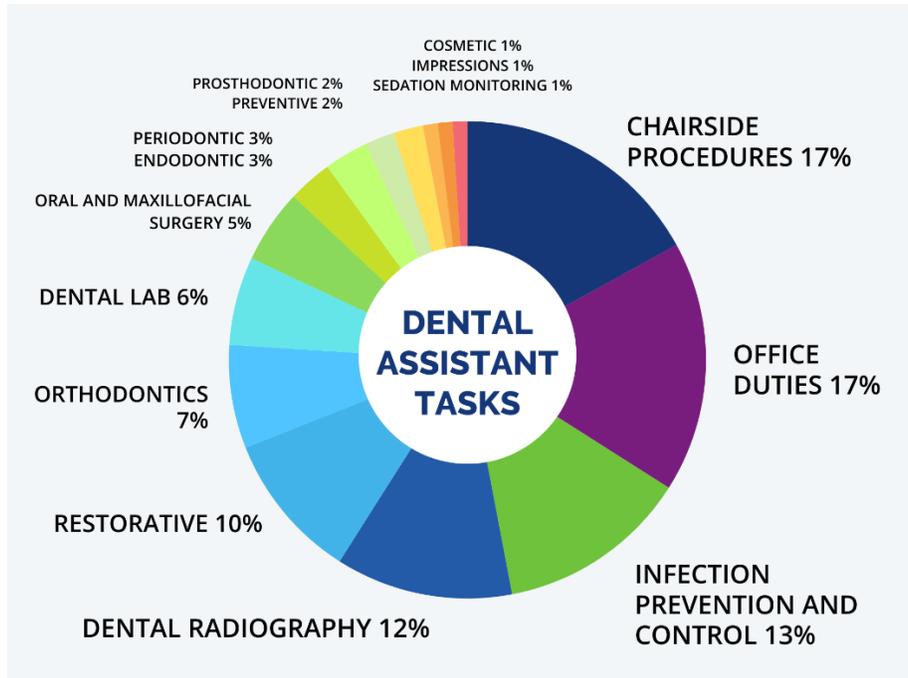
About the job analysis

In May 2023, a diverse group of dental professionals, including dental assistants, educators, and dentists, met to perform a job analysis to take a deep dive into everything that dental assistants do. During the meeting, which was facilitated by exam development consultants, participants identified the duties and tasks performed by dental assistants, as well as the underlying knowledge, skills, abilities, and attributes required to perform those tasks.

Following the meeting, DANB sent an online survey to dental assistants across the United States. Survey participants were asked how often they performed each task and, for some tasks, asked if they performed the task independently or assisted with the task. More than 4,700 dental assistants across all levels of experience responded.

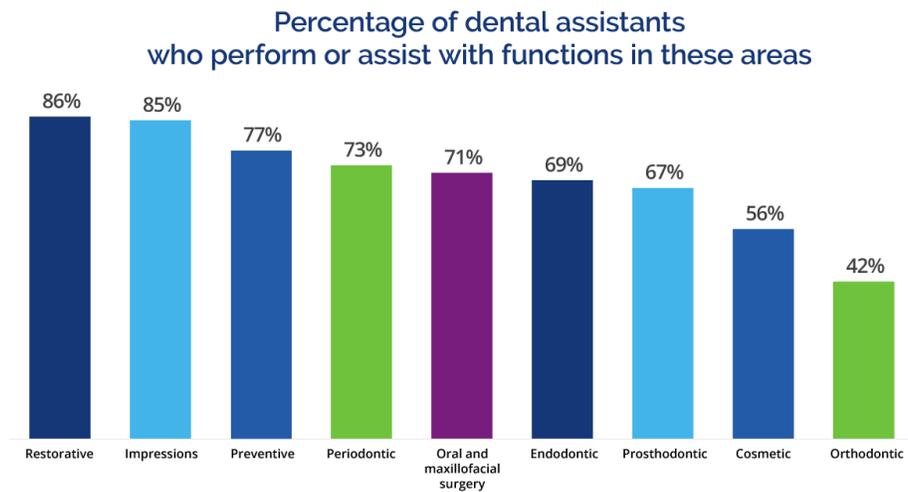
Dental assistant tasks

Dental assistants perform a number of tasks across different areas. The chart below illustrates those areas and the percentage of tasks performed within each.



Expanded and specialty functions

Beyond their core duties of infection prevention and control, acquiring dental images, and chairside and office duties, dental assistants perform and assist with a variety of other functions. The chart below illustrates the percentage of dental assistants who assist with or perform one or more functions related to these procedures.



Discussion

Dental assistants play a pivotal and wide-ranging role in dental practices, handling duties such as dental infection prevention and control, dental radiography and imaging, preparing the operator, and supporting the entire dental team. They also assist with and perform preventive and restorative functions such as applying sealants, polishing teeth, and assisting with composite fillings.

Additionally, dental assistants are essential in helping patients improve and maintain their dental health by providing patient education. Dental assistants are often responsible for offering guidance on oral hygiene, explaining procedures and treatments, and providing post-treatment instructions. Their interpersonal skills — communication, empathy, and the ability to provide comfort — are equally critical, as they ensure that patients feel at ease during procedures and fully understand their treatment plans.

The vast scope of responsibilities makes dental assistants indispensable to a practice's success, yet the ongoing shortage of qualified dental assistants has put a strain on practice efficiency and reduced the level of patient care.

Competitive compensation and career growth opportunities are top factors for retaining dental assistants, as revealed in DANB's [Dental Assistants Salary and Satisfaction Survey](#). According to the 2024 survey results, based on national median data, Certified Dental Assistants reported \$29 per hour as a fair wage and dental assistants who are not certified reported \$25 per hour as a fair wage.

Compare this against the cost of replacing a dental assistant, which ranges from \$30,000 to upwards of \$100,000, as cited in DANB's [Financial Impact of Dental Assistants on the Dental Practice](#) research. Dental practices that invest in their assistants through ongoing training, education, and fair compensation see measurable financial returns, including lower turnover, enhanced productivity, greater patient satisfaction, and an improved bottom line.

Further, the dental community can look to dental assistants to support access to care initiatives. When dental assistants are qualified to perform preventive and restorative functions, and dentists delegate these functions to dental assistants, dental practices and clinics can more effectively and efficiently deliver patient care. This approach not only benefits patients but also offers dental assistants a more fulfilling career path, which in turn helps address workforce shortages and improves retention in the profession.

Appendix: Complete list of functions

The following charts list the tasks that were included in the survey and the percentage performed by a dental assistant.

Note: The question asked about performance of the function, but respondents may have provided an affirmative response if a dental assistant performs or assists with the task.

ADMINISTRATIVE/GENERAL OFFICE DUTIES	% Perform
Stock office / operatory (e.g., materials, supplies)	98%
Check office cleanliness	97%
Prepare instrument processing area (e.g., receiving, cleaning, packaging, sterilization, storage)	97%
Assemble procedure trays	97%
Maintain team efficiency (e.g., keep appointments on time, assist with operatory turnover / set-up)	96%
Flush water lines	94%
Adjust dental chairs	93%
Monitor expiration dates (e.g., supplies, solutions, dental materials)	92%
Attend daily staff preparation meeting (e.g., review notes about schedule)	90%
Communicate with external teams (labs, vendors, dental / medical referrals, IT support)	87%
Maintain personal credentials (e.g., AED, CPR, license, registration, certificate, certification)	87%
Check dental unit waterline delivery system	85%
Manage patient appointments	84%
Evaluate equipment functionality	82%
Maintain equipment maintenance logs (e.g., AED, sterilizer, ultrasonic)	81%
Test equipment readiness (e.g., computer system, utility cart, compressor)	80%
Order supplies (e.g., materials, products and/or equipment for the dental practice)	78%
Perform equipment maintenance	76%
Respond to patient communications (e.g., voicemails, emails, mail)	74%
Maintain handpiece / instrument repair and service logs	73%
Maintain personal immunizations and vaccinations as required	71%
Assemble patient hygiene bags	71%
Distribute router slips/day sheets/schedules (paper or electronic)	69%
Check in patient upon arrival (e.g., verify patient identification, verify patient demographics)	69%
Contact vendor for equipment maintenance if needed	67%
Check out patient upon departure (e.g., take payment, schedule new appointment)	66%
Maintain emergency kit	65%
Manage risk for the dental office (e.g., state and federal regulations, HIPAA, informed consent and waivers)	64%
Coordinate accommodations with patients (e.g., translator / interpreter, physical)	62%
Maintain test logs (e.g., Bowie-dick, DUWL)	62%
Maintain SDSs (e.g., ensure updated SDSs are on file, manage chemical inventory)	59%
Maintain AED training records	58%
Maintain crash cart	53%
Discuss insurance/financial resources with patient	52%
Coordinate bloodborne pathogen training for staff	48%
Document safety incidents in personnel records (e.g., post-exposure, sharps injury, other injury)	47%
Manage storing and lending of records	46%
Maintain controlled substance log	41%
Verify patient insurance benefits	39%

INFECTION PREVENTION AND CONTROL	% Perform
Wear personal protective equipment (PPE)	100%
Clean and disinfect environmental surfaces (e.g., light handles, computer equipment, clinical contact surfaces)	99%
Place barriers on environmental surfaces	99%
Disinfect patient-care items and devices	98%
Remove debris from instruments prior to sterilization	98%
Perform sharps safety protocols	97%
Clean instruments prior to sterilization	97%
Store sterilized instruments	97%
Participate in OSHA Bloodborne Pathogens Standard training	96%
Transport contaminated instruments	96%
Perform hand hygiene	95%
Prepare disinfectants for use	95%
Package contaminated instruments	94%
Sterilize instruments	94%
Perform respiratory hygiene/cough etiquette	92%
Follow safe injection practices (e.g., single use, recapping)	92%
Follow infection prevention documentation policies and procedures	91%
Maintain sterilization equipment	91%
Flush waterlines between patients	90%
Manage infection control supplies (e.g., storage, monitor expiration dates)	89%
Conduct sterilization monitoring (e.g., chemical, biological)	89%
Manage biohazardous waste (e.g., handling, transport, disposal, documentation)	87%
Monitor dental unit water quality	77%
Perform annual infection control plan review	72%
Maintain / update exposure control plan	71%
Shock waterlines	71%
Perform dental unit water quality testing	67%
Coordinate infection prevention control plan	62%
Coordinate personnel safety for the practice (e.g., immunizations, PPE use, work restrictions, training)	62%
Interpret dental unit water quality test results	59%
Perform boil-water alert procedures	24%

DENTAL IMAGING	% Perform
Use operator and patient radiation protection techniques (e.g., distance, position, shielding)	98%
Remove all objects from patient (e.g., partials, dentures, glasses, jewelry, medical devices)	97%
Position patient for intraoral imaging	96%
Clean and disinfect digital sensors	95%
Place and position image receptor (i.e., film, digital sensor, PSP plate)	95%
Explain purpose of radiation exposure to patient	95%
Place lead apron on patient	94%
Position tubehead	93%
Operate intraoral x-ray unit	93%
Obtain panoramic image	92%
Place thyroid collar on patient	91%
Position patient for extraoral imaging	90%
Operate digital extraoral x-ray unit	89%
Store digital sensors	88%
Position patient for dental photographs	85%
Obtain patient photograph	76%
Mount intraoral images (film or digital image)	70%
Operate handheld x-ray unit	67%
Use operator handheld x-ray unit protection techniques	67%
Obtain CBCT image	55%
Use film badges for personnel radiation monitoring	47%
Operate film-based extraoral x-ray unit	45%
Obtain cephalometric image	44%
Maintain radiation safety log book	43%
Conduct equipment radiation leakage monitoring	41%
Scan photostimulable phosphor (PSP) plates	32%
Store PSP plates	30%
Store x-ray film	29%

CHAIRSIDE DENTAL PROCEDURES	% Perform
Greet, escort and seat patient	99%
Observe patient during procedures (e.g., comfort, pain, anxiety)	99%
Ensure patient safety (e.g., provide safety glasses, place patient napkin)	99%
Organize procedure tray	98%
Communicate patient complaint to dentist	98%
Explain procedure to patient (purpose, procedure, post-op instructions)	98%
Perform four-handed dentistry (e.g., pass and retrieve instruments)	98%
Deliver dental materials to chairside	98%
Maintain field of vision and isolation (e.g., lighting, cotton rolls)	98%
Verify trays have been cleaned and disinfected	97%
Ensure handpieces are working	97%
Verify correct patient record is in place	97%
Prepare dental materials (e.g., mix materials, operate amalgamator/triturator)	96%
Verify patient took pre-medication	95%
Chart entries in clinical records (e.g., charting, completed treatment)	95%
Assist with emergencies and complications	95%
Provide education to patient / caregiver (e.g., procedure, oral hygiene instructions)	95%
Provide patient with updates throughout procedure	95%
Operate procedural equipment	94%
Provide patient with oral hygiene instructions	94%
Review dental / medical history with patient	93%
Set up anesthetic syringe	92%
Explain and obtain consent for procedure with patient	92%
Perform preliminary examination	87%
Position patient for procedure	86%
Set up for extraoral suction	85%
Verify lab prostheses are available for procedure	85%
Discuss risks, benefits, and alternative treatments with patient	85%
Prioritize patient treatment schedule (e.g., sequencing procedures)	85%
Follow up with patient pre- and post-op	83%
Obtain patient vital signs (e.g., blood pressure, heart rate, respiratory rate)	81%
Evaluate patient health history for contraindications	81%
Manage regular/contaminated waste (e.g., disposal, handling)	80%
Set up isolation systems	79%
Manage hazardous waste (transport, disposal, documentation)	79%
Perform pediatric patient behavior management	70%
Monitor patient during administration	70%
Set up specialty machines (e.g., microscopes, centrifuge, implant machines)	66%
Set up aerosol mitigation devices	58%
Place dental dam	52%
Maintain amalgam separator logs	42%
Assist with dental sleep medicine (e.g., airway obstruction, sleep apnea)	39%

ORTHODONTICS	% Perform
Prepare cement/bonding agent	36%
Etch enamel to prepare for bonding	33%
Assist with orthodontic emergencies	31%
Assist with placement/fitting of intraoral and extraoral orthodontic appliances	31%
Assist with debanding/debonding procedures	30%
Polish teeth before placement of bands/brackets	27%
Debride, polish and repair removable appliances	27%
Place or remove elastomeric ring separators	25%
Place arch wires	25%
Place or remove ligature ties	25%
Place or remove elastomeric ties	25%
Remove supragingival cement after bonding or banding	25%
Remove loose or broken bands/brackets	25%
Debride, polish and repair fixed appliances	24%
Fit and cement orthodontic bands	22%
Place or remove steel separating springs	19%
Directly bond orthodontic brackets	18%

COSMETIC PROCEDURES	% Perform
Teeth whitening	57%
Veneers	54%

RESTORATIVE PROCEDURES	% Perform
Assemble local anesthetic syringe	87%
Place topical anesthetic	79%
Remove excess cement with hand instruments	73%
Cure restorative materials	71%
Fabricate and place temporary crown	68%
Cement temporary crown	68%
Trial fit and place preformed temporary crown	67%
Remove temporary crown	67%
Place retraction materials	66%
Finish temporary crown	66%
Place or remove matrix band and wedge	56%
Take final impression for fabrication of indirect restorations	54%
Apply desensitizer	48%
Prepare tooth for restorative material (e.g., etch, prime, apply bonding material)	46%
Place cavity liners or bases	36%
Adjust occlusion	36%
Remove excess cement with rotary instruments	34%
Place restorative materials in prepared cavity	34%
Finish composite resin restoration	34%
Place interim therapeutic restoration	34%
Prepare cavity for restoration	32%
Polish amalgam restorations	22%
Carve amalgam restorations	21%

PREVENTIVE FUNCTIONS	% Perform
Apply fluoride varnish	72%
Perform fluoride treatments	63%
Perform coronal polishing	62%
Apply sealants	58%
Perform silver diamine fluoride treatment	34%

PROSTHODONTIC TREATMENT	% Perform
Adjust dentures	52%
Permanent restoration (e.g., fixed bridge)	50%
Apply soft denture reline for tissue conditioning	50%
Indirect restoration	48%
Refit and replace retention caps	36%

PERIODONTIC TREATMENT	% Perform
Periodontal charting	66%
Periodontal probing	32%
Supragingival scaling	23%
Ultrasonic scaling	20%
Place periodontal dressings	19%
Remove periodontal dressings	19%
Subgingival scaling	19%

ORAL AND MAXILLOFACIAL SURGERY PROCEDURES	% Perform
Dentoalveolar procedures (e.g., tooth extraction, implants, bone grafting)	59%
Remove sutures	55%
Remove implant healing caps or cover screws	43%
Place implant impression copings	40%
Minimal sedation (i.e., patient is in a minimally depressed level of consciousness)	34%
Remove surgical dressings	32%
Diagnostic and therapeutic procedures (e.g., removal of benign and malignant tissue, needle ablation, TMJ repair or reposition)	27%
Moderate sedation (i.e., depression of consciousness during which patient responds purposefully to verbal commands)	27%
General anesthesia (i.e., loss of consciousness during which patient is not arousable, even by painful stimulation)	18%
Deep sedation (i.e., depression of consciousness during which patient cannot be easily aroused but responds purposefully following repeated or painful stimulation)	17%
Reconstructive surgical procedures (e.g., craniofacial surgery, skin grafts, cleft lip and cleft palate repairs)	15%

MONITOR NITROUS OXIDE / OXYGEN ANALGESIA ADMINISTRATION	% Perform
Position patient for procedure	86%
Monitor patient during administration	70%
Operate inhalation sedation equipment	50%

ENDODONTIC TREATMENT / ROOT CANAL THERAPY	% Perform
Percussion and palpation tests	58%
Thermal sensitivity tests	53%
Dry canals with paper points	46%
Place cotton pellets and temporary restorative materials into endodontic openings	45%
Flush root canals	44%
Place soothing medicaments in canals (e.g., pulp capping)	42%
Electrical pulp vitality test	35%
Obtain endodontic cultures	21%

IMPRESSIONS	% Perform
Obtain patient impressions for study models	84%
Obtain impressions for fabrication of appliances	83%
Take digital impressions	67%

DENTAL LABORATORY PROCEDURES	% Perform
Track / log laboratory cases	81%
Pack case for shipment to the dental laboratory or dental office	78%
Prepare impression for pouring	78%
Separate the model from the impression	77%
Pour gypsum into the impression	72%
Trim the model	69%
Manage laboratory materials (e.g., store, monitor expiration dates)	66%
Select dental material	64%
Operate vacuum-former	62%
Perform aseptic technique on model	59%
Trim and finish appliance	58%
Use a light-curing oven (e.g., Triad)	39%
Fabricate cases with 3D Printer	25%