



By Robin Nguyen, DDS, MS



Become a dentist? Who would purposely want to look in a person’s mouth on a daily basis? Everybody hates going to the dentist, right?

Visiting the dentist may not be an easy thing for the average person. That’s why being a dentist can be such a rewarding profession — not only are you diagnosing diseases affecting the oral cavity, but restoring beautiful smiles and confidence in every patient you interact with as well. There’s no truer balance between health, science and art than the dental profession.

Dentistry is not at all about drilling teeth and placing fillings. That may have been true many decades ago, but dentistry today is filled with cutting-edge evidence-based research. In addition to being responsible for managing diseases affecting the oral cavity and creating beautiful smiles, dentists also are instrumental in reconstructive surgery of the head and neck area for trauma patients. Dentistry is at the forefront in recognizing the relationships among systemic diseases and conditions such as diabetes, oral cancer and premature birth weight in connection with early signs within the oral cavity. Dentists aren’t just clinical practitioners; they are educators, public health activists, forensic pathologists and researchers.

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## What Makes Dentistry a Good Career?

- ◆ **autonomy and flexibility:** Most dentists have their own practice and can dictate their hours.
- ◆ **service to others:** Dentists help patients maintain and improve their oral health and quality of life.
- ◆ **empowering patients:** Dentists can give patients the smile they are proud to wear.
- ◆ **technology and research:** Dentistry is at the forefront of research in preventive care and interactions with overall systemic health.
- ◆ **creativity:** Dentists use science to diagnose diseases and artistic skills to create beautiful smiles.
- ◆ **job satisfaction:** Dentistry is ranked No. 3 among the “100 Best Jobs” according to *U.S. News* and No. 1 in “Best Health Care Job.”
- ◆ **employment growth:** Dentists enjoy job stability and are projected to increase in growth by 16 percent in the next 20 years.

## So You Want to Become a Dentist ...

It's recommended that an applicant complete a four-year college degree before entering dental school. There currently are 65 dental schools in the U.S.; dental school typically is an additional four years, though a few are three years. It consists of comprehensive didactic studies in the health sciences relating to the head and neck area, as well as clinical patient experience. Upon completion of dental school, a doctorate degree is earned. In order to practice, dental school graduates must pass a clinical licensing examination that is specific for the state in which they wish to practice.

Here are a few suggestions to help you prepare to become a dentist:

- ◆ In high school, it's recommended to get a broad exposure to natural science courses and college preparatory classes in mathematics, chemistry and biology.
- ◆ Though it's not mandatory for the completion of a bachelor's degree, it is recommended that applicants complete an equivalent of a four-year college degree. Some undergraduate college courses required for dental school include: chemistry, organic chemistry, biology and physics.
- ◆ Ask to volunteer or shadow in your family dentist's office to get a more hands-on understanding of the day-to-day practice.
- ◆ Talk to college admission officers about financial aid resources and dental school requirements.
- ◆ Before applying for dental school complete the prerequisite college classes and the national Dental Examination Test, usually taken a year before dental school.
- ◆ Get involved in pre-dental clubs if they available at your school or in your community

## Beyond Dental Schools: What Career Options Are There for Dentistry?

Eighty percent of dental graduates are general practitioners, while 20 percent continue on to pursue additional training in specialized fields of dentistry. Dental specialties include: endodontics, oral and maxillofacial surgery, oral maxillofacial pathology, oral pathology, prosthodontics, pediatric dentistry, periodontics, orthodontics and oral radiology.

Most dentists are private practitioners with their own office, but dentistry can take you on a variety of different career paths. Dentists also work in public health agencies, hospitals and military bases. Other avenues to pursue are careers in dental industry, research and academics.

If you are looking for a rewarding career in health care that combines science and creativity — dentistry is the career for you. Good luck on your journey exploring the dental profession!

Dr. Robin M. Nguyen received her Bachelor of Science degree in Biological Sciences from the University of California. She attended dental school at the University of California, San Francisco where she graduated in 2009 with her DDS degree. Dr. Nguyen completed her endodontic residency training at the University of Florida, earning her specialist certificate and a Master of Science degree in Dental Sciences.

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