



# Visiting the hygienist

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## What is a dental hygienist?

Dental hygienists are specially trained to work as part of the dental team, to give care to patients.

They play an important part in dental health care and are mainly concerned with preventive dental health and treating **gum disease** - showing you correct home care and helping to keep your teeth and gums healthy.

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## What can I do to help the hygienist?

The hygienist's main work is to prevent and treat gum disease. This includes professionally cleaning your teeth by removing plaque and tartar (usually called a 'scale and polish' or a prophylaxis). However, perhaps their most important role is showing you the best way to keep your teeth free of plaque. Plaque is a sticky coating that forms constantly on your teeth. Hygienists also give advice about diet and about preventing tooth decay. The hygienist will work with your dental team to give you care that is tailored to your needs.

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## Can a dental hygienist do anything else?

Dental hygienists also take **dental x-rays**. The dentist will use these to help diagnose problems and decide on the possible treatment. Dental hygienists can also place fissure sealants, apply fluoride varnishes and administer fluoride treatments. Other procedures may be carried out by dental hygienists depending on the laws that apply where they work.

Tooth whitening is also often carried out by the dental hygienist, under a prescription from your dentist.

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## 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. Hygienists see patients directly, under the prescription of a dentist, or can see them independently. If your practice does not have a hygienist, your dentist can refer you to either another dental practice or to a hygienist practice.

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## Why is this dental treatment important?

Regular professional cleaning to remove plaque and tartar, combined with looking after your teeth and gums properly 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.

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## Can a hygienist help prevent dental disease?

This is what the training of the hygienist is all about. They will carefully remove the hard deposits of tartar (or 'calculus') that build up on the teeth and teach you how to prevent them coming back. This will do a lot to slow the progress of gum disease.

By talking to you about your diet, and recommending other preventive measures, the hygienist can help you keep to a routine that will slow down tooth decay. Regular visits and advice will help build your confidence in keeping your mouth healthy.



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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 showing you and telling you how to look after your mouth at home. The hygienist may also suggest giving up smoking, as this will reduce staining and improve your general health. 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. They can also give you special advice for home care if you have dental implants or orthodontic appliances.

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## What help is available for children?

Children can benefit from having their teeth polished. The hygienist can also apply fluoride varnishes to help prevent **decay**.

The permanent (or 'adult') back teeth can also benefit from having the biting surfaces sealed. This is done by applying a special plastic coating to the biting surface soon after the teeth come through. For more information see our '**Tell me about**' - **Pit and fissure sealants**.

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## Why doesn't the dentist do this work?

Some dentists will do this type of work themselves. However, many now realise that the hygienist has been specially trained to carry out scaling and polishing and can spend longer with you. They are also expert at teaching you how to look after your teeth and gums. Often the hygienist will spend a number of appointments getting the gums healthy ready for the dentist to restore the teeth with crowns and fillings.

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## Will the treatment hurt?

Scaling and polishing is usually pain free. However, if you do have any discomfort the hygienist can use anaesthetic creams, or give you some local anaesthetic. It is important that you let the hygienist know at the time so they can help with your pain.

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## Is the treatment expensive?

Costs of treatment with a dental hygienist will vary depending on 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.

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## What does the dental hygienist do in the practice?

You can do a lot to help yourself and the hygienist, as you are the one who looks after your mouth in between visits to the practice. Your hygienist will have shown you how to remove plaque with a toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste.

They will also have shown you how to clean between your teeth with 'interdental' brushes, floss or tape.

There are many oral care products you can get, including specialist toothpastes, electric or 'power' toothbrushes, and mouthwashes. Your hygienist will recommend those that are best for you.

We recommend that you follow three simple steps to help keep your teeth and gums healthy:

- brush your teeth last thing at night and at least one other time during the day, with a fluoride toothpaste
- cut down on how often you have sugary foods and drinks
- visit your dental team 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 and your diet, and by making some recommendations for you to consider.

Chewing sugar-free gum for 10 minutes after meals can also help to prevent tooth decay. Chewing gum makes your mouth produce more saliva, which cancels out the acid produced in your mouth after drinking and eating.

<https://www.dentalhealth.org/tell-me-about/topic/caring-for-teeth/visiting-the-hygienist>