

Protecting you during your dental visit



For years, dental offices have taken steps to protect patients and dental health care team members against disease transmission during treatment. You may see some of these measures in the waiting area and the clinic, but many take place behind the scenes.

IN THE WAITING AREA

Your dental office wants to keep you and other patients safe from the minute you walk in the door. Coughing and sneezing can spread germs. For that reason, you should cover your mouth and nose whenever you cough or sneeze. To help with this, many offices provide disposable masks or tissues in the waiting area to use when you are sick.

Clean hands are also important. Often there is hand sanitizer in the waiting room. To clean your hands with a sanitizer, rub a small amount of it all over the surfaces of your hands and fingers until your hands are dry.¹

IN THE CLINIC

You may have heard about personal protective equipment (commonly referred to as PPE), which consists of different equipment that dental care providers wear to protect them from germs spread through blood, saliva, or airborne particles. Examples of this equipment includes gloves, jackets, gowns, safety glasses, and face masks that cover the nose and mouth. For some treatments, face shields may also be worn. Most of these items are disposable—used for only 1 patient and thrown away after use. Those that are not disposable must be cleaned with disinfectant between patients.

Other surfaces in the treatment area, like chairs, counter-tops, blood pressure cuffs, and light handles, must also be disinfected between patients.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Rest assured, any instruments used during your treatment must be clean. Some, like the tube used to suck saliva from your mouth, are disposable.

Instruments that are not disposable must be handled carefully after every patient. After your treatment, these

instruments must be taken to a special area to be washed, sorted into sets for the next use, and put in a special oven called an autoclave to expose them to high heat designed to kill germs.

Even the quality of the water used during your dental treatment must be monitored. Water from the dental unit must be the same quality as drinking water.² To achieve this, a dental office may use water from a source other than the public water system or may treat the water system. Regardless of where the water comes from, your dental office must check the quality regularly.

CONCLUSION

Dentists work hard to keep patients safe during their visits. These are only some of the steps dentists take to reduce the risk of infection. If you have questions about infection control, ask your dentist or the dental team members. ■

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You can find more information for patients at ADAcatalog.org or at MouthHealthy.org.

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. When and how to wash your hands. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/when-how-handwashing.html>. Accessed April 14, 2020.

2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Summary of infection prevention practices in dental settings: basic expectations for safe care. 2016. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/oralhealth/infectioncontrol/pdf/safe-care2.pdf>. Accessed May 7, 2020.