



Northeast Delta Dental

What are the different types of dentists?

Going to the dentist regularly is an important part of your oral health journey. But did you know there are dentists you can see beyond your general dentist who have received advanced training and specialize in specific areas of dentistry? In fact, the ADA now recognizes twelve different dental specialties. The type of dentist you see should depend on what kind of dental needs you have.

How do you know which dentist is right for you? Let's learn more.

General dentists and specialists - what services do they provide?¹

In order to receive the education required to become a dentist, students generally are required to have three or more years of undergraduate education plus four years of dental school. There are two types of general dental degrees: a DDS (Doctor of Dental Surgery) and DMD (Doctor of Medicine in Dentistry or Doctor of Dental Medicine). These are the same degree, and dentists with a DDS or DMD have the same education. The dentist's university determines which dental degree is awarded.

An additional 2-6 years of post-graduate training is required to become a dental specialist. As of 2019, slightly more than one in five (21.0%) of the approximate 200,000 professionally active dentists in the U.S reported that their practice, research, or administration area is an ADA-recognized specialty.²

Dental specialties must meet certain training, education, and miscellaneous requirements to be recognized by the National Commission on Recognition of Dental Specialties and Certifying Boards (NCRDSCCB). Specialties are recognized in areas where advanced knowledge and skills are required to maintain or rebuild oral health.

A General Dentist is the most common type of dentist. They can provide a full range of routine and often complex dental services. This dental professional is the primary care dental provider for people of all ages and is responsible for the diagnosis, treatment and overall management for your lifetime of oral health needs. If you are in need of more complex or specialized services or procedures, your general dentist may refer you to a dentist that has advanced training and specializes in that service.

The NCRDSCB and American Dental Association currently recognize the following 12 dental specialties:

Pediatric Dentist: Similar to how a child sees a pediatrician, a pediatric dentist (also known as a pedodontist) provides services for child and adolescent oral health. This type of dentist specializes in the oral development of children from infancy through adolescence. They often see children with special oral health care needs.

Orthodontist: Orthodontists specialize in the alignment of the teeth and jaw. These dental professionals use wires, braces, retainers, etc. to correct your bite. A good bite makes it easier for you to bite, chew, and speak, and properly aligned teeth can be more esthetic. Today, a significant proportion of an orthodontist's patients are adults. You are never too old to put your teeth in good alignment.

Periodontist: A periodontist specializes in the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of gum disease. Periodontists treat cases ranging from mild gingivitis to more severe gum disease (periodontitis). Additionally, periodontists are trained in the placement, maintenance, and repair of dental implants. If you have a chronic or serious gum disease problem, you may want to see this professional.

Endodontist: This dental specialist treats problems pertaining to the soft pulp (nerve tissue, blood vessels) inside of a tooth. They perform both routine and complex endodontic procedures, including [root canal treatment](#), endodontic surgery, and special procedures to save teeth after traumatic dental injuries. Endodontists can help you manage tooth pain and save teeth where decay has reached the pulp and has become infected.

Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeon: Oral surgeons specialize in the recognition, diagnosis, and treatment of a wide spectrum of diseases, injuries, and defects in the head, neck, face, jaws, and the hard and soft tissues of the mouth. Some of the problems they treat include routine and complex tooth extraction, surgical correction of misaligned jaws, biopsy and removal of tumors, cysts, and lesions of the jaw and mouth, jaw trauma, head and neck cancer, and dental implant surgery.

Prosthodontist: This dental specialist handles routine and complex dental and facial problems that involve restoring missing teeth and jaw structures. A prosthodontist is highly trained in cosmetics, dental implants, crowns, bridges, veneers,

dentures, temporomandibular joint disorders (TMJ/TMD), and more. Some focus on the treatment of patients who have defects of the head and neck region due to cancer, surgery, trauma, and birth defects.

Oral Pathologist: An oral pathologist typically does not provide direct care. Instead, they actively use clinical, microscopic, radiographic, biochemical, or other examinations to study and research the causes, processes, and effects of diseases that start in the mouth or jaw. They act as consultants to general dentists and specialists to diagnose cases. One common example of an oral pathology procedure is the pathology examination and report that is received after an oral biopsy.

Oral Maxillofacial Radiologist: This kind of dental specialist helps diagnose and manage oral diseases by using x-rays, CT scans, MRI, and other forms of imaging. They study and interpret images taken for conditions affecting the head, neck, face and jaws.

Dental Anesthesiologist: These specialists work with other dentists and oral health specialists to manage pain, anxiety, and overall patient health during other surgical or diagnostic procedures pertaining to the mouth or face. Similar to a medical anesthesiologist this oral specialist develops anesthetic plans, administers anesthetics, and monitors patient health throughout the entire sedation or general anesthesia time period. This time period extends, before, during, and immediately after an oral surgical or dental procedure. The specialty is dedicated to promoting patient safety and comfort.

Oral Medicine Specialist: These clinician specialists provide primary dental care for those with complex medical issues that require long-term management and/or modifications in the delivery of oral health care because of their medical status. They have particular expertise in the diagnosis and management of such oral problems as mouth sores and other soft tissue changes, taste change, dry mouth, oral burning sensation, and jaw or facial pain.

Orofacial Pain Specialist: The practitioners assess, diagnose and manage problematic and sometimes disabling oral and facial pain conditions. They treat conditions such as temporomandibular muscle and joint (TMJ) disorders, oromotor and jaw behavior disorders, and head and neck pain. This specialty also includes screening, management, and coordination of care associated with sleep-related breathing disorders.

Dental Public Health Specialist: Dental public health specialists develop strategies to prevent and control dental diseases and promote dental health through organized community efforts. It is a form of dental practice that serves the community as a patient, rather than the individual. Public health specialists are involved with applied dental research, dental health education, administration of group dental care programs, and the prevention and control of dental diseases on a community basis.

How do I know what kind of dentist to see?

Your general dentist plays a key role in your overall oral health care and, in many cases, performs most of the same procedures as a specialist. Sometimes, however, your oral problem may require extra expertise. Your dentist may exclude certain types of procedures like wisdom tooth extractions, [root canals](#), implants, periodontal surgery, or other type procedures from their practice. Or, they may not feel comfortable with some situations like treating young children or the medically compromised.

Don't be afraid to ask questions about the complexity and seriousness of your oral health problems and your dentist's comfort and level of experience in handling your issue. Your general dentist will refer you to a specialist when they feel that for some procedure you may be better served by seeing someone with advanced specialized training.

Additional resources

Looking for a dentist? [Click here](#) to see a list of dentists in the Delta Dental network.

Looking for more information? Learn more about general oral health:

- [How often should I visit the dentist?](#)
- [Mouthwash 101: What it does and how to use it](#)
- [What is a root canal?](#)

Sources

¹(n.d.). Retrieved June 24, 2020, from <https://www.ada.org/en/about-the-ada/dentists-doctors-of-oral-health>

²Supply and Profile of Dentists. (n.d.). Retrieved September 11, 2020, from <https://www.ada.org/en/science-research/health-policy-institute/data-center/supply-and-profile-of-dentists>