

Oral Health Tips

Infection Prevention in a Dental Office

Bacteria and viruses are found all around us. And, although we cannot see them, we need to take preventing germs seriously, including at the dental office. Learning about infection prevention will not only make you a smart consumer, it may ease any safety concerns you may have.

Infection prevention practices in dental offices should include a full range of recommended methods to keep you and your family safe and healthy. Your dentist and dental office staff should maintain rigorous procedures all day long to help protect you from infectious microorganisms (germs), including those that cause HIV/AIDS.

You should see some of the routine precautions during your dental visit such as the use of masks, gloves and frequent hand washing by the staff. Other precautions such as sterilization and disinfection of instruments and equipment are typically performed prior to your visit.

Precautions for Infection Control

All dental offices should follow standard precautions and safety guidelines recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). These measures should be part of your dental office's daily routine to protect staff and patients against infectious microorganisms. *Some of these include:*

- Wearing of gloves, masks and protective eyewear (during certain procedures)
- Washing hands and changing gloves before and after each and every patient
- Disposing of needles and other sharp items in special containers
- Disposing of waste items and contaminated material properly

Sterilization and Disinfection

Dental office staff use a variety of sterilization and disinfection methods on instruments and surfaces to kill bacteria and viruses that may cause disease. *Some of these include:*

- Heat-tolerant dental instruments should be sterilized by steam under pressure (autoclaving), dry heat, or unsaturated chemical vapor. Heat-sensitive instruments can be sterilized by immersing them in liquid chemical germicides registered by the FDA as sterilants.
- Surfaces and equipment that cannot be moved or removed for cleaning and sterilization such as the dental chair, counter tops, drawer handles, light handles should be cleaned and disinfected with an EPA-registered hospital disinfectant.

Use of Disposable Items

Use of disposable items is another way that dental offices help protect your health. Many dental materials, such as gloves, masks, paper drapes, needles and saliva ejectors, should be used only once and then disposed of appropriately.

What Can I Do?

You and your family deserve the best care along with the best infection prevention practices at each and every dental visit. Be an active consumer regarding your

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dental treatment. *Here are some of the things to look for:*

- Does the dental office look clean and orderly?
- Is the dental office staff willing to answer questions about infection prevention?
- Do the dentist and staff wear gloves and other appropriate protective attire during actual dental treatment?
- Do the dentist and staff wash their hands before putting on a clean pair of gloves?

- Do equipment and surfaces in the dental treatment room appear clean?
- Are all items used in the patient's mouth heat sterilized or disposable?

Don't let your concerns over the spread of infection keep you from seeing your dentist regularly. You should always feel free to ask your dentist about any health and safety concerns you have.

Sources: American Dental Association: www.ada.org; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov; Organization for Safety and Asepsis Procedures: www.osap.org