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Protection from Infection

Infection control is a set of recommended safety precautions that dentists put in place to protect patients and their staff. Many dental procedures involve direct contact with blood and saliva. Strict infection control helps to stop the spread of disease. Improved infection control procedures call for most of the instruments and supplies that your dentist uses to be either heat-sterilized or disposable.

Do all dentists practice infection control?

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration Bloodborne Pathogens Standard requires that all employees who may come in contact with blood must be trained about proper infection control procedures. The dental board in your state also may have additional rules that your dentist must follow.

What are standard precautions?

Standard precautions are safety procedures established by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the American Dental Association (ADA) to make sure every patient is safe. These precautions require all dental staff involved in patient care to wear appropriate protective items, such as gloves, masks, and eyewear. Dentists and their assistants can use different kinds of protective gloves. Latex, vinyl, or nitrile gloves are used for patient examinations and procedures and are worn whenever skin could make contact with body fluids. The dentist or team member throws his or her gloves away after seeing each patient, washes his or her hands, and puts on a new set of gloves. The dental team also changes masks after each patient.

What else does my dentist do to protect me?

When you first sit in the dental chair, you'll probably see your dentist washing his or her hands. Hands are washed at the start of the day, before putting on gloves, and after taking off gloves or touching any potentially contaminated surface.



Your dentist also makes sure that the instruments he or she uses during dental procedures are clean by sterilizing them, a process that destroys all forms of microbial life. Some protective items—such as gloves, masks, paper drapes, suction/water tube tips, and needles—do not need to be sterilized because they are used only once and then discarded.

Do dentists sterilize instruments after each patient?

Dentists sterilize the drill and other instruments between patients to prevent the transmission of diseases. Dental offices follow and monitor specific heat sterilization procedures, which are outlined by the CDC and the ADA. Most dental instruments are sterilized in special machines because it takes much more than just soap and water to make sure instruments are free of bacteria. Recom-

mended sterilization methods include placing these instruments into an autoclave (steam under pressure) or a dry heat oven, or to use a chemical vapor (commonly called a chemiclave). Typically, this equipment is kept in the office, away from a patient's view.

How are other objects sterilized?

Before you enter the examination room, all surfaces are disinfected. To sterilize equipment that can't be moved, such as X-ray units and countertops, a disinfectant is applied. Some offices may drape this equipment with protective covers, which are replaced after each patient. Disposable sharp items—such as needles that cannot be sterilized—are thrown away in puncture-resistant biohazard containers. Any disposable item that is contaminated with blood is discarded in a special container.

Resources

www.agd.org

At the AGD's Web site, you can search more than 300 oral health topics, post a dental question, sign up for e-newsletters, find an AGD dentist, and more.

1.877.2X.A.YEAR

AGD's toll-free referral number. Call to locate an AGD member dentist in your area.