

## Infection control in the dental office

### What is infection control?

Infection control is the process of protecting patients, as well as dentists and their staff, against the spread of germs in the office. Dentists often come in contact with saliva and blood particles, all of which can carry bacteria and viruses that can spread from instruments and equipment dentists use.

### Do all dentists practice infection control?

In 1986, less than 30 percent of dentists wore gloves, masks or gowns. Thanks to approved procedures and heightened awareness to the dangers of infection, these infection control tools are required in all dental practices today. To fight the spread of diseases, such as HIV, Hepatitis B (HBV), syphilis and herpes viruses, your dentist has strict procedures and uses a variety of measures to ensure sterility in the office.

### What are universal precautions?

Universal precautions are safety procedures established by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and

the American Dental Association. These precautions require all dental staff involved in patient care to use appropriate protective garb such as gloves, masks and eyewear. After each patient visit, the gloves are discarded, hands are washed and a new pair of gloves is used for the next patient. In fact, most of what a dentist wears can be thrown away after a single use. These precautions are used for each and every patient to prevent the transmission of the AIDS virus and other blood-borne and infectious diseases.

### Do dentists sterilize the handpiece (drill) and other instruments after each patient?

Dentists sterilize handpieces and other instruments to prevent the transmission of diseases, after exams and procedures. Dental offices follow and monitor specific heat sterilization procedures, which are outlined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Dental Association. Most dental instruments are sterilized in special machines; it takes much more than just

soap and water to make sure instruments are free of bacteria. Recommended sterilization methods include placing these tools into an autoclave (steam under pressure), a dry heat oven, or chemical vapor (commonly called a chemiclave).

### How are other objects sterilized?

Before you enter the examining room, all surfaces, such as the dental chair, drawer handles and countertops are disinfected. To sterilize equipment that can't be moved, such as X-ray units and countertops, disinfectant is applied after each patient to ensure a sterile environment. Some offices may drape this equipment with protective covers, which are replaced after each patient. Sharp items and anything contaminated with blood or saliva are disposed of in special containers with safety lids.

### How else does my dentist protect me?

When you first sit in the dental chair, chances are the first thing you'll see is your dentist washing his or her

hands. Hands are washed at the start of the day, before gloving, after removal of gloves and after touching any contaminated surface.

Your dentist uses a variety of protective items that are used once and then thrown away, including gloves, masks, paper drapes, scalpel blades and needles. Dentists and their assistants can use different kinds of protective gloves. Latex or vinyl gloves are used for patient examinations and procedures, and are worn when skin is in contact with body fluids. Between patients, the gloves are thrown away, the hands washed and a new set of gloves is used to treat the next patient. For cleaning and sterilizing instruments, heavy rubber utility gloves are used.

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