

Infection Control

How the dental office is kept clean.

When you visit the dental office, you might have some questions about how the dental team keeps the office clean and safe from infectious disease. Patients commonly ask how dental instruments and working areas are kept clean throughout the day. This fact sheet is intended to answer some frequently asked questions, and to provide you with the latest information on what are known as infection control techniques.

The guidelines referred to in this fact sheet have been developed by the Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario (RCDSO) and are endorsed by the Ontario Dental Association (ODA). The RCDSO is the regulatory body responsible for the quality of care by dentists, and the ODA is the voluntary professional organization that represents the dentists of Ontario. Infection control practices recommended for your dental office are up to date and are designed to prevent the transmission of blood-borne viral disease such as Hepatitis B and the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).



An Infection Control Plan

All dental offices should practise the following infection control plan:

- **Universal Precautions**

Universal precautions are used for each and every patient in the office, and are the foundation of infection control practice. Universal precautions mean that the dentist treats each patient in the same way, using the same methods. Gloves are recommended for all dental procedures that may involve blood and/or blood contaminated saliva. After each patient, gloves are discarded. As per RCDSO guidelines, hands are either washed with antimicrobial soap and water, or an alcohol-based hand rub is used, before a new pair of gloves is donned. In almost all procedures, including cleaning and polishing of teeth, a facial mask and protective eye-wear will also be worn.

- **Sterilization of instruments**

A variety of instruments are used in dental treatment. Whether the procedure is one of cleaning and polishing, or a root canal, infection control guidelines state that each instrument should undergo a sterilization process after each patient. These guidelines apply to all instruments, with the exception of some instruments that are disposed of after a single use. After the dentist has finished treating a patient, the instruments they have used undergo two stages of cleaning and then a careful sterilization process before they are used on any other patient. Sterilization is a process that kills all forms of life, including infectious organisms such as Hepatitis B and HIV.

Regular testing of the sterilizer is done to ensure instruments are in fact being sterilized and that all infectious organisms are killed. With these detailed testing procedures, dentist and patients can be confident that the instruments used have been completely cleaned and sterilized, or in the case of disposable items, that they are not used more than once.

- **Disposable Items**

A number of items in the dental office are used on patients only once and then discarded. Disposable items include gloves, needles and syringes, protective coverings for instrument trays, and certain instruments that cannot withstand the sterilization process. Discarded needles are placed in a designated container to prevent needle-stick injuries, not in the regular waste collection. Dentists are especially concerned about needle injuries and the risk of infection they pose, so they are handled very carefully.

- **Surface Disinfection**

Patient safety extends to the dental treatment area as well. The area in which your treatment occurs is cleaned and disinfected after each patient, and/or disposable covers are used to protect surfaces for contamination. These covers are replaced after treating each patient.

Dental Education on Infection Control

You can be assured that dentists and their staff receive the most current evidence-based information on infection control techniques. Infection control is offered as a continuing education course through their professional association, the ODA. The ODA also publishes information on infection control guidelines and related issues in its journal, *Ontario Dentist*.

Your health is important to your dentist. If you have questions about how you are protected from infectious diseases ask your dentist. She or he would be happy to discuss these issues to make you feel more comfortable and secure about your dental visit.

Dentists know the facts about infection control. The profession has established guidelines that all dentists must follow to protect you. Your safety is a priority for you and your dentist.