



Assisted Hygiene – Tips for Success

As the dental healthcare worker shortage continues, more practices are turning to an assisted hygiene model of care to meet patient demand. These models of care allow the clinical team to utilize their skills to the fullest their license dictates. Underutilizing dental auxiliaries creates unnecessary bottlenecks. Shifting responsibilities and cross-training has the added benefit of promoting teamwork.

Hygiene Care Models

Assisted hygiene models of care have been around for years but recently have become a popular solution to the ongoing dental hygienist shortage. Keep an open mind, as many different assisted models are available; [find one that works for your practice.](#)

- **Accelerated hygiene** runs 2 columns with 16 patients treated in an 8-hour day with the help of a stellar dental assistant.
- **Assisted hygiene** staggers 2 columns with 12 patients seen in 8 hours, allowing uninterrupted time for SRP and periodontal maintenance at select times throughout the day.
- **Targeted assisted hygiene** selectively schedules double bookings only when patients meet specific criteria, such as those under a certain age with a history of healthy oral care.
- **Shadow scheduling** double books only when a patient has not confirmed their appointment and a no-show is likely.

Keep the 20-20-20 rule in mind. For healthy patients, spend the first 20 minutes reviewing health history, taking x-rays, and updating information; spend the second 20 minutes with scaling procedures, with the last 20 minutes for polishing, flossing, exam, oral hygiene instruction, scheduling, and disinfecting the room. A periodontal maintenance patient will likely fall closer to 15-30-15.

Care Team Responsibilities

A successful assisted hygiene approach involves teamwork, with the dental assistant and dental hygienist working closely together. The dental hygienist will focus on scaling and patient communication to improve oral health. The dental assistant will turn over operatories, seat patients, review health history, take x-rays, polish, floss, schedule the next hygiene appointment, and sit for the exam. State laws vary; check with your state regarding duties the dental assistant



can provide. The hygienist will reduce the time they spend on tasks that auxiliaries can do. This allows the team to treat more patients.

Tips for Success

- The dentist will need to be flexible with the timing of exams and respond, as much as possible, to the dental assistant who will orchestrate exam timing.
- The dental assistant must focus on working within this model of care and not expected to help in other areas of the practice.
- Stagger two columns to support opportunities for SRP and periodontal maintenance that require more time. ([see templated schedule](#))
- Utilize the dental assistant to the full extent possible within state guidelines.
- The hygienist should start a chart note template; the dental assistant will enter exam findings and close out the notes. Waiting to write notes at the end of the day will create more stress within this model.
- The hygienist and hygiene assistant should work in side-by-side operatories that allow them to gauge where the other provider is in the care model, creating a better flow for patients and less chaos for providers. For example, the hygienist may let the patient know they are almost done scaling, which allows the assistant to gauge their time. Additionally, the hygienist will be able to determine when polishing has started, or the exam is wrapping up.
- Some form of communication, often a templated, quickly filled-in note, should pass from the hygienist to the assistant and be shared with the doctor during the exam, providing continuity in communication.
- Not all patients are good candidates for assisted hygiene; note these in the practice management software to avoid scheduling errors.
- The hygienist and assistant will need time to adapt to the new schedule, be patient, and plan to evaluate at the end of a month before making any changes.
- These models increase productivity and the volume of patients treated - plan to compensate the hygienist accordingly.

A successful implementation of assisted hygiene will provide a more enjoyable workflow for the hygienist than working solo. Additionally, one of the biggest time wasters and sources of frustration, waiting on the doctor for a hygiene exam, is eliminated. The hygienist can move on to the next patient while the assistant takes over the exam duties.

Careful planning can provide a more efficient, productive, enjoyable hygiene schedule. When staffing shortages impact patients' ability to receive hygiene care, this becomes an attractive option, even if implemented temporarily until the hygiene shortage resolves.