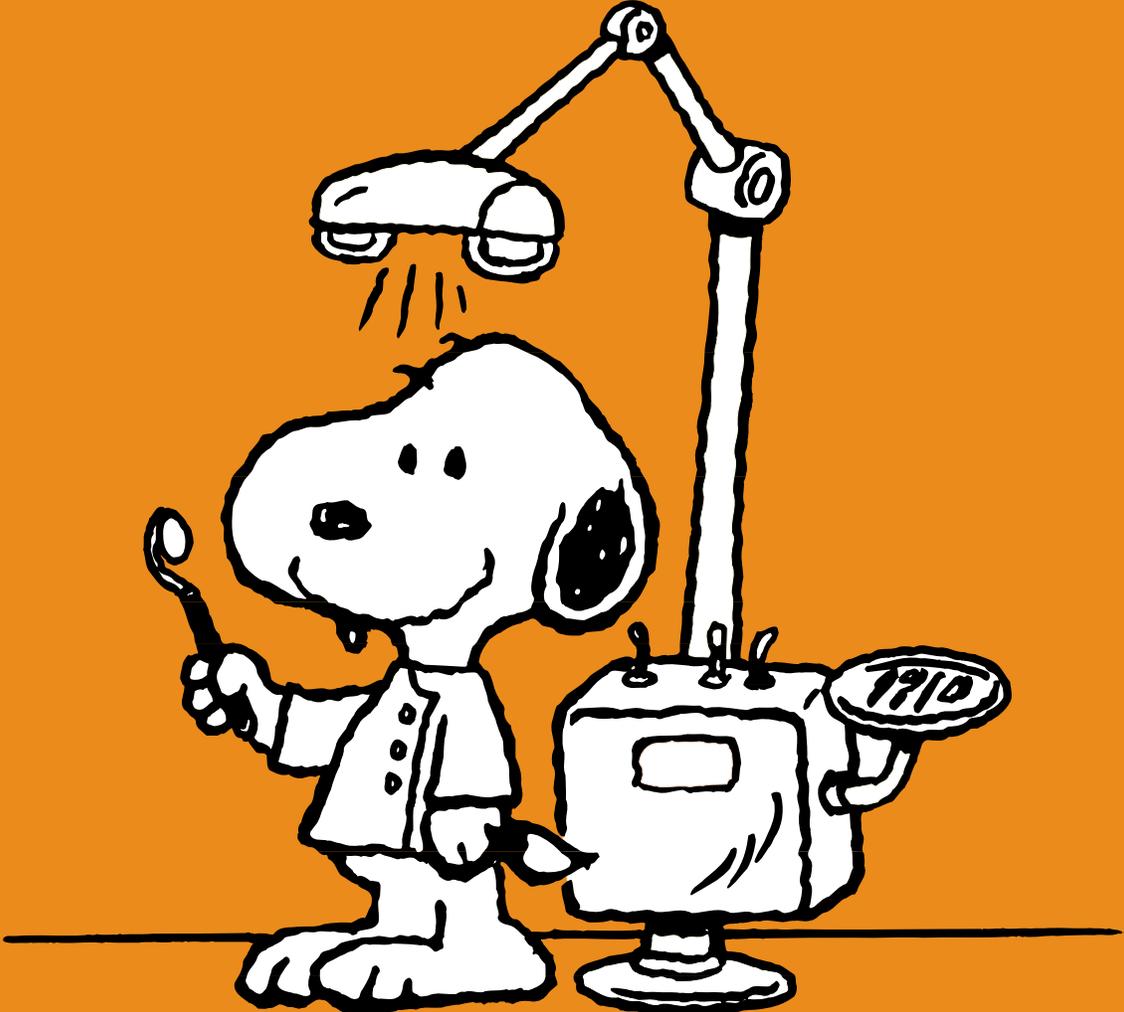
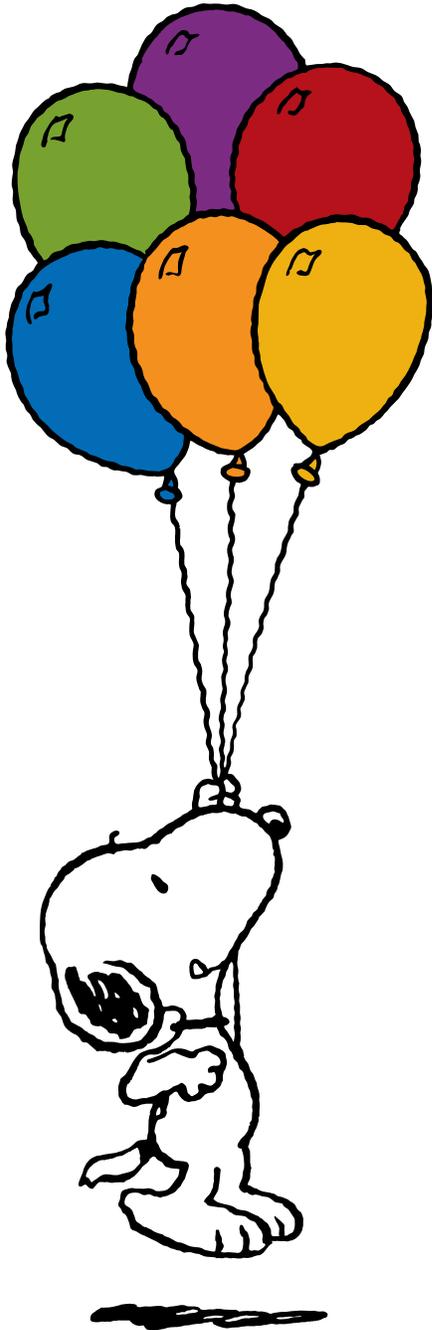


Choosing a Dentist

MetLife

Life Advice





Selecting a dentist who meets your needs and expectations is a decision that's too important to make without careful consideration. When you need a dentist, you want a professional you can trust. Don't select a dentist on the basis of cost or advertisements alone.

Dental appointments are likely to be less stressful if you know and like your dentist. Fearful patients usually experience less anxiety when they visit a dentist they trust. Don't wait until a problem forces you to find a dentist—acting before you have a serious problem may save you time, money and discomfort.

Daily brushing and flossing help to keep your teeth, gums and mouth healthy. Equally important, though, are regular visits to a dentist who can provide the professional care that will ensure a lifetime of good oral health.

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This Life Advice booklet, *Choosing a Dentist*, was based on information gathered from The American Dental Association and The Academy of Pediatric Dentistry.

Types of Dental Professionals

Dentists

Dentists are grouped into two categories: general dentists and specialists. Both general and specialty dentists have received a four-year doctorate degree in dentistry, which is referred to either as a D.D.S. (doctor of dental surgery) or D.M.D. (doctor of dental medicine). There is no difference between the two degrees; dentists who have a D.M.D. or D.D.S. have the same education and have met the same requirements. Specialists, though, have additional, specific training in a particular area of dentistry, and they usually limit their practice to that specialty.

General dentists, also known as family dentists, are trained to provide most of the dental procedures patients need on a routine basis. A general dentist's services usually include those listed below, although a general dentist will sometimes refer you to a specialist for some of these procedures:

- Routine checkups including teeth cleaning, X-rays and screening for gum disease and oral cancer.
- Fillings
- Gum disease treatment
- Extractions
- Crowns and bridges
- Cosmetic dentistry
- Root canal therapy
- Sealants
- Pediatric dentistry
- Home care instructions
- Dentures and partial dentures
- Mouthguards

If your general dentist determines you have a problem requiring special skills, knowledge or equipment, he or she will refer you to a specialist. Before you see a specialist, your general dentist should explain to you why the referral is recommended. He or she should share your dental records, X-rays and any relevant dental and health information with the specialty dentist.

Specialty dentists typically complete two to six years of education in a specific area after receiving a D.D.S. or D.M.D. Dental specialists include:

- **Endodontists** care for the inner portion of the teeth. They perform root canals (i.e., remove the pulp and nerves inside a tooth) and treat diseases of the pulp and nerves inside the tooth.
- **Oral and maxillofacial surgeons** treat injuries and defects of the mouth and jaw; they also often perform complex tooth extractions.



- **Orthodontists** design and apply corrective and supportive appliances (braces) to realign crooked teeth. They also treat neuromuscular and skeletal abnormalities of facial structures related to the mouth.
- **Pediatric dentists** care for infants, children, adolescents and patients having psychological, physical or emotional needs. These practitioners are skilled at handling first visits to the dentist.
- **Periodontists** treat diseases of the soft tissues (gums) and bone that surrounds and supports the teeth.
- **Prosthodontists** design, construct and fit replacement teeth, such as implants, bridgework and dentures. They treat patients with impaired oral function associated with missing or deficient teeth and/or tissues.

Dental Hygienists

Dental hygienists teach patients how to prevent tooth decay and gum disease. They also clean teeth using special dental instruments. They may take X-rays, apply fluoride and complete routine tasks the dentist has started (e.g., polishing fillings). Dental hygienists have completed at least two years of schooling and have passed a state board licensing examination.

After the hygienist performs a routine cleaning, the dentist will check your teeth for problems. If you're lucky, you'll see more of your dental hygienist and less of your dentist! Your relationship with the hygienist is just as important as your relationship with the dentist. Keep this in mind when choosing a dental practice.

Gathering Information

Your Dental Benefit Plan

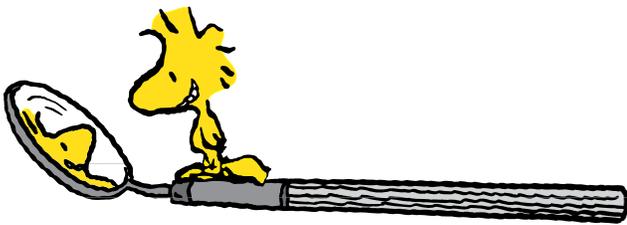
If you have a dental plan, check to see if your plan requires you to choose from a list of participating dentists to receive benefits. Some plans require that you use a participating dentist. Some insurance plans allow you to choose an out-of-network dentist (i.e., one who does not participate with the plan), but often your benefit will be less.

Get Recommendations

Ask friends, relatives and coworkers for recommendations. Are they satisfied with their dentist's service and quality of care? Ask your family physician, pharmacist and/or faculty members of a local dental school if they can provide suggestions. You may contact the local or state dental society for referrals; they're usually listed in telephone directories under "Dentists" or "Associations." If you're moving, your current dentist may be able to make a recommendation.

You can also check with a dental network or referral service.

These groups prescreen participants, generally recording dentists' educational background, experience and specialty. They can usually supply other information as well, such as a dentist who can speak a second language. Be aware, however, that some services only list dentists who pay to be included. To learn about a dentist's credentials, you can call or write your local or state dental society. Check your phone book for contact information, or search online for "dental society" or "dental association" in your area.



Narrowing Your Choices

After you've come up with a list of two or three dentists, consider how conveniently located they are. Are their offices near where you live or work? If not, it may prove difficult to schedule and keep appointments. Next, call their offices and ask some preliminary questions. Some things you should know:

- What are the office hours — is the dentist available when you're available?
- Does the practice accept your dental plan?
- Is payment requested at each visit or will the dentist file a claim with your insurance company and bill you for the balance?

- What are the fees for standard treatments (e.g., X-rays or cleaning)?
- Is information about fees provided before treatment is scheduled?
- Is the practice willing to set up a payment plan for more expensive treatments? Will they work with you to come up with a plan you can afford?
- Does the dental staff use universal precautions for infection control, such as gloves, masks, protective clothing and sterilized instruments and work areas?
- What is the protocol for patients who have emergencies during office hours, after office hours or when the dentist is away?
- If you call the practice with a problem, can you speak to the dentist? Are there established times for calls to and from the dentist? Are telephone calls returned the same day?
- Are patients notified when it's time for a checkup? Some practices will make a reminder call the day before a scheduled appointment; this can be a very helpful service.

Your First Visit

Once you've made your selection, schedule a visit. When you arrive, talk to the office staff about your dental benefit plan. If your plan uses a special claim form, be sure to bring one with the patient/employee portion already completed. The staff will probably have forms for you to fill out. These forms gather information about your medical and family history as well as information about your dental plan, so they can bill appropriately. Make sure you disclose all medical problems including any allergies you may have and all medications you are taking.



On your first visit, you will probably be able to decide if you've made a good choice. There are some important things you will be able to determine before you even see the dentist. Observe carefully: Does the office appear to be clean, neat and orderly? Is the office staff (e.g., receptionist) pleasant and helpful?

Because a trusting relationship between you and your dentist is so important, you may want to reserve time to ask questions during the first visit. Make sure you understand the answers, or ask for further clarification.

The questions you ask are important, but it is also important to use this time to decide whether you are comfortable with the dentist's manner. For example, do you find him or her easy to talk to and easy to understand? Does he or she seem happy to answer questions? Is the practice a high-volume operation in which the dentist rushes from patient to patient? These dentists may be unwilling or unable to spend extra time with you if you need it.

If you're dissatisfied with the dentist's answers to your questions or uncomfortable with the dentist's manner, consider using another dentist from your list. You need to feel comfortable with your decision.

Continuity of Care

Many people find it advantageous and comforting to continue seeing the same dentist. By establishing a relationship over a period of time, you allow the dentist to develop a comprehensive picture of your dental health and establish a friendly relationship that can make visits more pleasant.

If at any point you feel uncomfortable or dissatisfied with the treatment recommendations or quality of dental care you or your child are receiving, speak with your dentist about your concerns. If your concerns cannot be resolved, you may wish to obtain a second opinion or seek the services of another dentist. If you do decide to change dentists, ask your previous dentist—in writing—to send a copy of your dental records including X-rays to your new dentist. Find a new dentist as soon as you decide to make a change—don't wait until you have an emergency.

Do Your Part

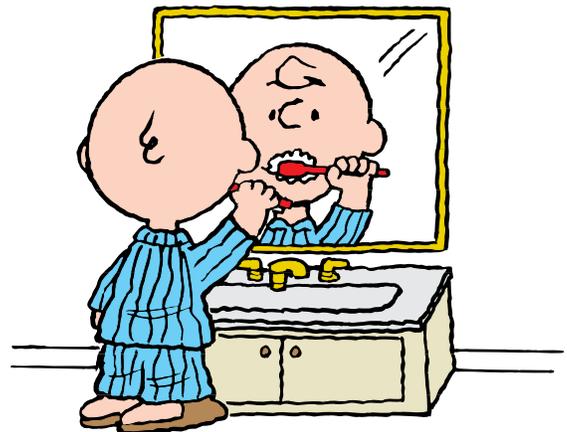
The best dentist in the world can't keep your teeth healthy without your active participation. Tell your dentist about any changes you notice in your teeth and mouth. Be particularly sure to tell your dentist about any sores, swelling or discoloration that you find on your tongue, lips, cheeks, throat, jawbone or palate. Most oral cancers occur in people over 45, and dental checkups are important to detect cancerous lesions in early, more treatable stages.

Follow your dentist's recommendations for brushing, flossing and checkups. By doing your part at home, you'll contribute significantly to a healthy mouth and a satisfying relationship with your dentist.

Children and the Dentist

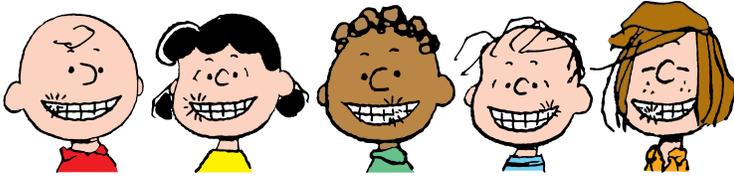
Good dental care starts at an early age. The earlier the first dental visit, the better the chance of preventing dental problems. For most children, teeth can be protected from decay by daily brushing with fluoride toothpaste, limiting snacks and drinks with lots of sugar, and having regular dental checkups. Understanding what can increase a child's risk for tooth decay, along with early examination and preventive care, can protect your child's smile now and in the future.

A first visit can serve as a get-to-know-you session, allowing a child to become familiar with the dentist and the dentist's office and equipment. A dentist used to treating children won't just talk to you about dental health; he or she will also talk to your child in ways a child can understand.



Many dentists recommend a "first visit by first birthday," though some dentists think a child should be seen as soon as the first tooth comes in. A big concern for babies and children is Early Childhood Caries, also known as baby bottle tooth decay or nursing caries. Many parents aren't aware that tooth decay can be caused by nursing, and that there are precautions that can be taken to avoid Early Childhood Caries.

If you have a general dentist you're satisfied with, check to see if he or she treats children. If your dentist does not treat children, ask for the names of some dentists who do. Also, get his or her opinion about the pros and cons of having your child see a pediatric dentist versus a family dentist.



In general, the same considerations that apply to choosing a dentist for yourself apply to choosing a dentist for your child. There are, however, some additional considerations:

- Does the dentist have a special interest in treating children? Pediatric dentists specialize in treating children, but many general dentists treat children as well.
- Is the waiting room equipped for children with toys, books and kid-size furniture?
- Will you be taught about your child's tooth development, the causes and prevention of dental disease, and appropriate home care?
- Will your child be taught about caring for his or her teeth in ways he or she can understand?
- Sealants shut out food particles that can get caught in the teeth and cause cavities. They work by filling in the crevasses on the chewing surfaces of the teeth. Find out the dentist's philosophy on sealants.

If you are anxious about dental visits, try not to communicate your anxiety to your child. Try to schedule appointments for young children in the morning; children tend to be more cooperative and attentive early in the day. Also, there is less chance of having to wait if you have one of the first appointments of the day.

Once you have a dentist that both you and your child are satisfied with, it's important to continue having regular checkups, even if your child never has a cavity or other problem. Regular visits help your child develop good lifelong dental care habits. Professional cleaning removes debris that builds up on the teeth; if not removed it can cause tooth decay and irritate the gums. Your child's dentist can also provide fluoride treatments that help renew the fluoride in the enamel, strengthening it and helping to prevent cavities.

For More Information

Free Publications

The quarterly Consumer Information Center Catalog lists more than 200 helpful federal government publications. Obtain a free copy by calling 888-8-PUEBLO; on the Internet at www.pueblo.gsa.gov, or by writing:

Consumer Information Catalog
Pueblo, CO 81009

Other Resources

American Dental Association

211 East Chicago Avenue
Chicago, IL 60611-2678
312-440-2500
www.ada.org

American Dental Hygienists' Association

444 North Michigan Avenue, Suite 3400
Chicago, IL 60611
312-440-8900
www.adha.org

American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry

211 East Chicago Avenue, Suite 1700
Chicago, IL 60611-2663
312.337.2169
www.aapd.org

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry offers 25 parent-education pamphlets on various aspects of pediatric dentistry. Pamphlets can be downloaded at no charge from the Web site; go to the home page and click on Parent Resource Center.



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