

# Infection control

## What is infection control?

Infection control is a set of recommended safety precautions that dentists implement to protect their patients and staff in the office. Strict infection control is required to prevent the spread of disease, since many dental procedures involve direct contact with blood and saliva. Improved infection control procedures with heightened awareness of the dangers of infection mean that the instruments and supplies your dentist uses in your mouth are either heat sterilized, or they are disposable items intended for one-time use.

## Do all dentists practice infection control?

In 1986, less than 30 percent of dentists wore gloves, masks or gowns. Today, these infection control tools are required in all dental practices. To fight the spread of diseases, such as HIV; Hepatitis B (HBV), syphilis and herpes viruses, your dentist has strict procedures and may use a variety of measures to ensure that instruments used during dental procedures are sterile. As an extra precaution, many dentists and their staff may be vaccinated for Hepatitis B, to prevent them from potentially passing it on to patients. Sterilizing dental instruments, a process that destroys all forms of microbial life, is also an important part of infection control in a dental office.

**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 putting on and taking off gloves and after touching any potentially contaminated surface. Your dentist may use a variety of protective items that are used once and then thrown away, including gloves, masks, paper drapes, suction/water tube tips 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 whenever skin could be 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. If you are allergic to rubber or latex, your dentist can wear nitrile gloves, which do not contain any latex rubber proteins.

**What are universal precautions?** Universal precautions, used for every patient, are safety procedures established by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the American Dental Association (ADA). These precautions require all dental staff involved in patient care to use appropriate protective wear, such as gloves, masks and eyewear. For more information on CDC Infection Control guidelines, please visit [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov).

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

Dentists sterilize handpieces 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; 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). Typically, this equipment is kept in the office away from a patient's view. Ask your dentist to show you how and where instruments are sterilized.

## How are other objects sterilized?

Before you enter the examination 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 counter-tops, disinfectant is applied after each patient to ensure a germ-free environment. 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 disposed of in puncture-resistant biohazard containers. Anything contaminated with blood or saliva is disposed of in special containers with safety lids. Ask your dentist for additional information on how he or she is keeping you safe from germs and infectious 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; 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). Typically, this equipment is kept in the office away from a patient's view. Ask your dentist to show you how and where instruments are sterilized.

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