



Dental Specialists: A Breakdown

Understand the different dental specialists

What Makes a Dental Specialist Special?

Dental specialists become dentists the same way general dentists do: complete a 4-year undergraduate (bachelor) degree, pass the Dental Admission Test, and successfully earn a dental degree to become licensed to practice as a dentist. Specialists, however, spend at least an extra two years pursuing postgraduate training in their chosen specialty before getting board certified as a specialist.

What Type of Specialists Might I Need?

It is common for most people to visit at least one type of specialist in their lifetime. The type of specialist you will need will depend entirely on what is needed.

Here is a breakdown of the most common dental specialties:

Pedodontist

- A pedodontist, or pediatric dentist, specializes in working with children; some even more specifically work with special needs children
- Age does play a factor: as most baby (primary) teeth are lost by age 12, some pedodontists will refer patients who reach this age to a family or general dentist for their care
- Pedodontists perform routine services, like exams, cleanings, crowns, and fillings, but may also perform more specialty services, like root canals or pulpotomies (removal of tooth pulp) on primary teeth, whereas other specialists might only perform these specialty services on permanent teeth
- As very young or special needs patients might not be able to sit still for dental treatment, many pedodontists provide sedation or have hospital privileges, so they may provide dental treatment in a hospital, under anesthesia

Orthodontist

- Orthodontists specialize in tooth alignment and provides treatment to correct the position of teeth and jaws
- A general dentist might refer a patient with an overbite, underbite, crossbite, or misaligned teeth to an orthodontist
- Treatment usually consists of braces, retainers, aligners, or headgear



Why Would I Need a Specialist?

General dentists are able to perform many types of routine procedures, like exams and fillings, among other things. However, there are some cases where a procedure might be more complicated or when special tools or equipment may be needed. In these cases, a general dentist will often lean on a dental specialist to take care of the patient, whether through specialized care or simply for a second opinion.

Though many dental clinics have dental specialists on their staff, there may be times when a general dentist has to refer a patient to a dental specialist at an external office.

If your dentist feels a dental specialist is needed, they will usually provide you with a referral, which lists both the type of specialist and treatment needed.

Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeon

- Though general dentists often perform some simple surgical procedures, like extractions, patients are referred to oral and maxillofacial surgeons when more complex surgical procedures or sedation is needed
- This type of specialist doesn't only perform dental surgery like wisdom tooth removal, they also help many patients with medical procedures, like cleft lip/palate or those who need corrective jaw surgery
- Most oral and maxillofacial surgeons are licensed to provide all levels of sedation – from laughing gas to general anesthesia

Endodontist

- Endodontists specialize in treating conditions relating to tooth pulp, which is where the tooth's nerve and blood vessels live
- Though one treatment option for an abscessed, severely decayed, or broken/cracked tooth would be to have the tooth pulled, if possible, an endodontist will perform a root canal in an attempt to save the tooth structure
- Once a root canal is done on a tooth, an endodontist will likely refer you back to your general dentist for a permanent restoration, like a crown, to be applied to the treated tooth
- Most endodontists will only perform advanced procedures like root canals on permanent teeth, so if it is a primary tooth that requires endodontic treatment, a pediatric dentist may be needed

Periodontist

- Periodontists specialize in the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of gum disease and other tissues that support the teeth
- Patients are most often referred to a periodontist when they have been diagnosed with periodontitis (gum disease)
- Some treatments a periodontist might perform are surgical, including gum grafts or periodontal pocket reduction procedures
- Patients requiring a bone graft as a treatment for their gum disease might also be referred to an Oral and Maxillofacial surgeon for their treatment
- Periodontists also frequently provide dental implants

Prosthodontist

- Prosthodontists specialize in creating replacement teeth, like dentures, bridges, and partials, as well as reconstructive dentistry
- Many, but not all, general dental offices provide partial and denture services at their clinics, so they may refer a patient to a prosthodontist to create replacement teeth
- General dentists who can otherwise make replacement teeth in-office might refer patients with unique or absent jawbone structure, allergies to certain materials, or other medical conditions to a specialist in order to accommodate the patient's needs

Specialists and Dental Coverage

As dental treatment provided by a specialist can tend to get quite expensive when paying out-of-pocket, it is very important that you confirm prior to receiving any treatment that both the specialist you plan to see is in your dental network AND that any treatment planned by the specialist is covered under your dental plan benefits.



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