

Study Finds Low Rate of COVID-19 Among Dental Hygienists

Joint research investigates pandemic's impact on infection control practices in dental health setting; employment rate of dental hygienists

CHICAGO, February 24, 2021 — Despite having been designated as high risk for COVID-19 by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, a new study finds 3.1 percent of dental hygienists have had COVID-19 based on data collected in October 2020. This is in alignment with the cumulative infection prevalence rate among dentists and far below that of other health professionals in the U.S, although slightly higher than that of the general population.

The research, published by The Journal of Dental Hygiene, is the first large-scale collection and publication of U.S. dental hygienists' infection rates and infection control practices related to COVID-19. In partnership, the American Dental Hygienists' Association (ADHA) and the American Dental Association (ADA) have released initial findings from their ongoing, joint research designed to estimate the prevalence of COVID-19 among U.S. dental hygienists, as well as examine infection prevention and control procedures and any associated trends, including employment data.

"We were pleased to collaborate with the ADA on this research that takes a closer look at the impact of the pandemic on the dental team," said ADHA CEO Ann Battrell, M.S.D.H. "The low infection rate shows us we can provide oral health care in a safe manner, which is critically important since the safety of dental hygienists and the patients they serve is of the utmost importance to ADHA and the dental hygiene profession."

The data reflect results from the first month of a longitudinal study on the impact of COVID-19 on dental hygienists in the U.S. As of October 8, 2020, a total of 4,776 dental hygienists from all 50 states and Puerto Rico had participated in the survey. Of the survey participants, 149 respondents (3.1 percent) had ever been diagnosed with COVID-19, either through testing or by a medical professional, and they were not clustered in any particular geographic region.

"The dental team has been following strict infection control guidance since long before COVID-19," said Marcelo Araujo, D.D.S., M.S., Ph.D., a senior author of the report, chief executive officer of the ADA Science and Research Institute and ADA chief science

officer. “This study is another proof point that dental care is safe for patients and dental professionals.”

According to the study, more than 99 percent of respondents reported their primary dental practice had enhanced infection prevention or control efforts in response to the pandemic. The majority of respondents wore eye protection, masks, protective coverings and gloves during dental procedures.

A second study in the joint research examined employment rates of dental hygienists, finding that 8 percent of dental hygienists had left the workforce since the onset of the pandemic. Of this group, nearly 60 percent left the workforce voluntarily, citing reasons such as overall concerns around the pandemic, safety concerns and childcare issues.

“We know the pandemic has impacted healthcare workers in so many ways,” said JoAnn R. Gurenlian, R.D.H., M.S., Ph.D., A.F.A.A.O.M., a lead author of the research and the chair of ADHA’s Task Force on Return to Work. “While one-quarter of the 8 percent of dental hygienists who left the workforce were laid off due to early dental office closures, others were faced with tough decisions around whether or not they could continue to work in a setting that requires direct patient care. It’s a very personal decision. The good news is, the infection rate data shows that dental hygiene care can be delivered safely. And, with vaccine availability we may see more opportunities for dental hygienists to return to practice.”

According to the authors of the report, COVID-19 has led to a reduction in the dental hygienist workforce that is likely to persist until the pandemic passes.

“The pandemic is bringing unprecedented disruption to the U.S. health care sector, including in the dental workforce,” said Marko Vujcic, Ph.D., chief economist and vice president of the ADA’s Health Policy Institute. “We are continuing to examine employment patterns and the impact on the dental team, including how continued vaccine distribution will contribute to these patterns. Our research suggests once the pandemic is over, we could see employment patterns largely return to pre-pandemic levels.”

The ADHA and the ADA will continue to work together to track infection rate data and the impact of COVID-19 on dental professionals.

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About the American Dental Hygienists' Association

The American Dental Hygienists' Association (ADHA) is the largest national organization representing the professional interests of the country's over 215,000 dental hygienists. Dental hygienists are preventive oral health professionals, licensed in dental hygiene, who provide educational, clinical and therapeutic services that support total health through the promotion of optimal oral health. To learn more about ADHA, dental hygiene or the link between oral health and general health, visit ADHA at www.adha.org.

About the American Dental Association

*The not-for-profit ADA is the nation's largest dental association, representing 163,000 dentist members. The premier source of oral health information, the ADA has advocated for the public's health and promoted the art and science of dentistry since 1859. The ADA's state-of-the-art research facilities develop and test dental products and materials that have advanced the practice of dentistry and made the patient experience more positive. The ADA Seal of Acceptance long has been a valuable and respected guide to consumer dental care products. The monthly *The Journal of the American Dental Association (JADA)* is the ADA's flagship publication and the best-read scientific journal in dentistry. For more information about the ADA, visit ADA.org. For more information on oral health, including prevention, care and treatment of dental disease, visit the ADA's consumer website MouthHealthy.org*