CAREER KIT

Dental Assistant Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

How to Become a Dental Assistant

2026-10 edition

Inside: at-a-glance summary · step-by-step path · costs & requirements · 90-day action plan · documents checklist · exams · interview questions · resume bullets · common mistakes · 13-week tracker · resources

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SECTION 1

At a glance

Most dental assistants complete a dental assisting program, often about one year at a community college or technical school, though some states let you learn on the job. Rules vary by state: many require a certificate or registration for tasks like taking X-rays, and some require graduation from an accredited program and an exam. The DANB Certified Dental Assistant (CDA) credential is voluntary in many states but widely recognized.

Timeline	Under 1 year to 2 years (or on-the-job in some states)
Typical cost	$0–$15,000 depending on route
Education	Dental assisting certificate or diploma is most common; on-the-job training allowed in some states
License	Varies by state; entry level often unlicensed, but X-rays and expanded duties usually require a state credential
Median pay	$48,070 per year
Job outlook	+7% (2025–35), much faster than average; about 53,000 openings a year

SECTION 2

Step-by-step path

1. Check your state's dental assisting rules

Time: 1 week

Dental assisting rules vary by state more than most careers. Some states let you start with no formal training, others require a course for radiography (X-rays) or infection control, and some license or register assistants. California, for example, has a Registered Dental Assistant (RDA) license issued by the Dental Board of California. DANB's state requirements tool and your state dental board list the specifics.

2. Choose a training route

Time: 1–2 weeks

Most assistants complete a certificate or diploma program at a community college, technical school, or vocational school; BLS says most take about one year. Two-year associate programs are less common. If your state allows it, you can also train on the job, but a formal program makes it easier to qualify for certification and expanded duties.

3. Complete a dental assisting program

Time: 9–12 months (some shorter, associate programs 2 years) · Cost: $3,000–$15,000

Courses cover dental terminology, chairside assisting, instrument sterilization, infection control, radiography, dental materials, and front-office tasks. Look for a program accredited by the Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA), since graduation from one is an eligibility route for the DANB CDA exam and is required in some states. Most programs include an externship in a real office.

4. Get CPR certified and complete state-required courses

Time: 1–4 weeks · Cost: $50–$500

Most offices and certifications require current CPR/BLS. If your state requires a radiography, infection control, or coronal polishing course or exam before you perform those tasks, finish it now so you are fully useful on day one.

5. Earn DANB certification

Time: 1–3 months of study · Cost: About $400–$550 for the full CDA exam

The DANB Certified Dental Assistant (CDA) exam has three components: General Chairside Assisting (GC), Radiation Health and Safety (RHS), and Infection Control (ICE). RHS and ICE have no eligibility requirements, so many people take them first; some states accept RHS for X-ray qualification. The full CDA requires graduation from a CODA-accredited program or qualifying work experience plus current CPR.

6. Apply for dental assistant jobs

Time: 2–8 weeks

General dentistry offices hire the most assistants, followed by specialty practices like orthodontics, oral surgery, and pediatric dentistry. Your externship office is often your best lead. Highlight X-ray and infection control credentials, chairside skills, and any dental software you have used.

7. Grow into expanded duties or a new role

Time: Ongoing

In states that allow expanded functions, extra training and an exam can qualify you for tasks such as coronal polishing, sealants, or restorative work, often with higher pay. Many assistants later move into office management, dental sales, teaching, or dental hygiene school.

SECTION 3

Costs & requirements

Estimated costs (USD)

Item	Low	High	Note
Dental assisting certificate or diploma program	$3,000	$15,000	Community colleges are usually cheapest; typical range, varies by school
Associate degree in dental assisting	$8,000	$25,000	Two years; typical range, varies by school
Scrubs, books, and supplies	$200	$1,000	
CPR/BLS certification	$50	$150	
State radiography or infection control course	$100	$700	Only in states that require one; varies by state
DANB CDA exam (all three components)	$400	$550	Check danb.org for current fees; components can be bought separately
State registration or license fee	$0	$200	Varies by state; many states have none for entry level
Total	**$11,750**	**$42,600**	

Requirements

Education	BLS lists a postsecondary nondegree award as typical. Most programs take about a year. Some states allow assistants to learn on the job without formal training.
State rules	Requirements vary by state. Many states do not license entry-level assistants, but some require licensing, registration, or certification to enter the field or to perform tasks like radiography or infection control. California, for example, licenses Registered Dental Assistants.
Expanded duties	States that allow expanded functions, such as coronal polishing, require licensing, registration, or certification, usually including an exam and current CPR.
Certification	DANB's Certified Dental Assistant (CDA) is the best-known national credential. It is voluntary in many states but is accepted or required for certain duties in others.
CPR	Current CPR/BLS is required for the CDA and by most employers.
Skills	Manual dexterity, organization, infection control habits, and a calm, friendly manner with patients.
Health and background	Programs often require immunizations, and some employers and states run background checks.

SECTION 4

90-Day Action Plan

Tick each box as you finish the task. Do the phases in order; it is fine if a phase takes a little longer.

Phase 1: Know your state rules and pick a route

Days 1–30

Goal: Choose the fastest route that meets your state's requirements.

- ☐ Look up your state's dental assisting rules on DANB's state requirements page and the state dental board
- ☐ Decide between a formal program and on-the-job training (if your state allows it)
- ☐ Compare three programs on cost, length, CODA accreditation, and externship sites
- ☐ Enroll or apply to dental offices that train new assistants
- ☐ Get CPR/BLS certified
- ☐ Shadow a dental assistant for a day if you can

Phase 2: Build skills and credentials

Days 31–60

Goal: Gain chairside, sterilization, and X-ray skills employers need.

- ☐ Learn instrument names and tray setups for common procedures
- ☐ Practice infection control and sterilization steps until automatic
- ☐ Complete your state's radiography course or study for DANB RHS
- ☐ Study for DANB ICE using the official exam outline
- ☐ Learn the basics of dental practice software and charting
- ☐ Ask your externship office for feedback and a reference

Phase 3: Certify and get hired

Days 61–90

Goal: Pass key exams and start your first dental assisting job.

- [ ] Take DANB RHS and ICE, and plan for GC or the full CDA when eligible
- [ ] Register or apply for any state credential you need
- [ ] Write a one-page resume highlighting credentials and externship skills
- [ ] Apply to general, orthodontic, pediatric, and oral surgery offices
- [ ] Practice the interview questions in this kit
- [ ] Bring copies of your CPR card and certificates to interviews

SECTION 5

Documents checklist

Gather these early. Keep originals in one folder and scans in the cloud.

- ☐ High school diploma or GED
- ☐ Dental assisting certificate, diploma, or enrollment letter
- ☐ CPR/BLS card
- ☐ Radiography or infection control certificate (if your state requires one)
- ☐ DANB exam score reports or certificates
- ☐ State registration or license (if required)
- ☐ Immunization records
- ☐ Externship evaluation and reference letter
- ☐ Resume and list of 3 references
- ☐ Government-issued photo ID

SECTION 6

Exams & how to prepare

DANB Certified Dental Assistant (CDA)

What it is: Three components: General Chairside Assisting (GC), Radiation Health and Safety (RHS), and Infection Control (ICE). You must pass all three within a five-year period. Eligibility for GC and the full CDA requires CODA-accredited program graduation or qualifying work experience, plus current CPR/BLS.

How to prepare: 4–8 weeks per component using DANB's exam outlines and practice tests.

DANB RHS and ICE (stand-alone)

What it is: Radiation safety and infection control exams with no eligibility requirements. Some states accept RHS to meet radiography requirements.

How to prepare: 2–4 weeks each; focus on radiation safety, X-ray technique, and CDC infection control guidelines.

State dental assisting exams

What it is: Some states give their own written or law and ethics exam for registration or expanded duties. California's RDA, for example, has a written exam from the Dental Board of California.

How to prepare: Check your state dental board for the exam outline and approved courses.

SECTION 7

Interview questions

1. Why do you want to be a dental assistant?

Tip: Talk about helping patients feel comfortable and enjoying hands-on teamwork.

2. How do you sterilize instruments?

Tip: Walk through cleaning, packaging, sterilizing, monitoring, and storage in order.

3. Are you qualified to take X-rays in this state?

Tip: Know your state's rule and bring proof of your radiography credential.

4. How do you calm a nervous patient?

Tip: Mention explaining what will happen, small talk, and alerting the dentist.

5. Which procedures have you assisted with?

Tip: Name specific ones, like fillings, crowns, or extractions, and your role.

6. How do you handle a busy schedule with emergencies added?

Tip: Show flexibility and how you prep rooms quickly.

7. What would you do if you were stuck with a used needle?

Tip: Follow the office exposure control plan and report it right away.

8. Have you used dental practice software?

Tip: Name the programs you used and tasks like charting or scheduling.

9. How do you protect patient privacy?

Tip: Mention HIPAA, secure records, and not discussing patients outside work.

10. Tell me about a time you worked well on a team.

Tip: Use a real example from school, an externship, or another job.

11. What would you do if the dentist asked you to do a task you are not allowed to do in this state?

Tip: Say you would politely explain your scope; it shows you know the rules.

12. Where do you see yourself in five years?

Tip: Mention the CDA, expanded functions, office management, or hygiene school.

SECTION 8

Resume bullet examples

Adapt these to what you actually did. Use numbers wherever you can.

- Completed a dental assisting certificate program with an externship in a general dentistry office
- Assisted with fillings, crowns, extractions, and cleanings using four-handed dentistry
- Exposed and processed digital radiographs following state radiation safety rules
- Cleaned, packaged, and sterilized instruments and monitored the autoclave log
- Set up and broke down operatories following CDC infection control guidelines
- Updated patient charts and scheduled appointments in dental practice software
- Passed DANB Radiation Health and Safety (RHS) and Infection Control (ICE) exams
- Maintained current CPR/BLS certification

SECTION 9

Common mistakes to avoid

1. Assuming dental assisting rules are the same in every state
2. Taking X-rays or doing expanded duties without the required state credential
3. Paying for a program that does not meet your state's requirements
4. Skipping the externship or treating it casually
5. Letting CPR certification lapse
6. Ignoring DANB RHS and ICE, which have no eligibility requirements and help your resume
7. Not asking about pay for expanded duties when you add credentials

SECTION 10

13-week progress tracker

Fill this in by hand each week.

Week	Focus	Done?	Notes
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			

SECTION 11

Resources, salary & disclaimer

Resources

- **Dental Assisting National Board (DANB)**

https://www.danb.org

- **DANB: State requirements**

https://www.danb.org/state-requirements

- **American Dental Assistants Association (ADAA)**

https://www.adaausa.org

- **CODA: Accredited dental assisting programs**

https://coda.ada.org

- **BLS: Dental Assistants**

https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/dental-assistants.htm

Salary

Bottom 10%	Median	Top 10%
Less than $37,130	**$48,070 per year ($23.11 per hour)**	More than $62,250

Outlook: BLS projects employment of dental assistants to grow 7% from 2025 to 2035, much faster than the average for all occupations, with about 53,000 openings each year. There were about 388,600 dental assistant jobs in 2025.

Source: BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook, May 2025 wage data; projections 2025–35 — https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/dental-assistants.htm

Disclaimer. Requirements vary by state and change over time. Verify with the official sources listed. This guide is not legal or career advice.