CAREER KIT

Dental Hygienist Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

How to Become a Dental Hygienist

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

To become a dental hygienist, you complete a dental hygiene program accredited by the Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA), usually an associate degree that takes about three years including prerequisites. Then you pass the National Board Dental Hygiene Examination (NBDHE), a clinical exam, and any state law exam, and get licensed by your state dental board. Every state requires a license, and the rules vary by state.

Timeline	About 3 years (2–4 years depending on prerequisites)
Typical cost	$15,000–$80,000+ for most accredited programs
Education	Associate degree in dental hygiene from a CODA-accredited program (bachelor's also available)
License	State dental hygiene license required in every state
Median pay	$98,100 per year
Job outlook	+8% (2025–35), much faster than average; about 15,000 openings a year

SECTION 2

Step-by-step path

1. Finish high school science and math

Time: During high school or 1 semester

Dental hygiene programs are competitive and science-heavy. Biology, chemistry, math, and health classes in high school make the prerequisites easier. If you already finished school, you can take the prerequisites at a community college.

2. Complete the program prerequisites

Time: 1–2 semesters or more · Cost: $1,000–$6,000

Most programs require college courses such as anatomy and physiology, microbiology, chemistry, English, psychology, and math before you can apply, often with a minimum GPA. Many programs also want a set number of hours observing a dental hygienist at work. Check each school's list, because prerequisites differ.

3. Get into a CODA-accredited dental hygiene program

Time: Application cycle of 3–9 months

Licensure in nearly every state depends on graduating from a program accredited by the Commission on Dental Accreditation, so confirm accreditation on CODA's website before you apply. Most programs lead to an associate degree; some universities offer a bachelor's. Seats are limited, so apply to several programs.

4. Complete classes and supervised clinical work

Time: About 2 years after prerequisites · Cost: $15,000–$80,000+

You study oral anatomy, periodontology, radiography, pharmacology, and infection control, then treat real patients in the school clinic under faculty supervision. Clinic requirements are demanding, and many students find their own patients for required procedures. Plan on a full-time schedule.

5. Pass the NBDHE written exam

Time: 6–12 weeks of study · Cost: See JCNDE for the current fee (several hundred dollars)

The National Board Dental Hygiene Examination, run by the Joint Commission on National Dental Examinations (JCNDE), is used to meet the written exam requirement for licensure in all states. It has 350 items, including case-based questions, and is given at Pearson VUE centers. Your program director confirms your eligibility, and most students take it near graduation.

6. Pass a clinical exam and any state law exam

Time: 1–3 months · Cost: About $1,000–$1,500 including site fees

Most states also require a clinical board exam, such as the ADEX dental hygiene exam (administered through CDCA-WREB-CITA) or the CRDTS exam. Which exams your state accepts varies by state, and many states add a jurisprudence (law and ethics) exam. Check your state dental board before you register.

7. Apply for your state license and get hired

Time: 1–3 months · Cost: $100–$400 in license and background check fees

Submit your application, transcripts, exam scores, CPR certification, and background check to the state dental board. Then apply to general dental offices, periodontal and pediatric practices, community health centers, and public health programs. Many new graduates start part time at two offices.

8. Keep your license current and grow

Time: Ongoing

States require continuing education to renew a hygiene license, and many jobs require current CPR. Depending on your state, you can add permits such as local anesthesia or nitrous oxide. A bachelor's or master's degree opens doors to teaching, public health, and industry roles.

SECTION 3

Costs & requirements

Estimated costs (USD)

Item	Low	High	Note
Prerequisite college courses	$1,000	$6,000	Community college tuition is at the low end; typical range, varies by school
Associate degree in dental hygiene (tuition and fees)	$15,000	$50,000	Public community college programs are usually cheapest; typical range, varies by school
Bachelor's degree in dental hygiene	$30,000	$100,000	Typical range, varies by school and residency
Instruments, loupes, uniforms, and supplies	$3,000	$8,000	Many programs require a student instrument kit and magnification loupes
NBDHE exam fee	$500	$700	Check jcnde.ada.org for the current fee
Clinical board exam (ADEX/CRDTS) plus site fees	$1,000	$1,500	Agency fee plus any school site fee; check the testing agency
State license, law exam, and background check	$100	$400	Varies by state
Total	**$50,600**	**$166,600**	

Requirements

Education	Graduation from a CODA-accredited dental hygiene program. BLS says most hygienists have an associate degree, which typically takes about three years to complete including prerequisites. Bachelor's programs are also available.
License	Every state requires dental hygienists to be licensed. Requirements vary by state but generally include an accredited degree, the NBDHE written exam, and a clinical exam.
Exams	The NBDHE is accepted toward the written requirement in all states. Clinical exam requirements and accepted testing agencies vary by state, and many states add a law and ethics exam.
State scope of practice	What a hygienist may do, such as giving local anesthesia or working without a dentist on site, depends on your state's dental practice act. Check your state dental board.
CPR and health	Most programs and employers require current CPR/BLS certification, immunizations, and a health screening before clinical work.
Background check	Programs and state boards usually require a criminal background check, and some require fingerprints.
Continuing education	Required to renew your license. The number of hours and renewal cycle vary by state.
Skills	Fine hand control, patience, clear communication with nervous patients, and attention to infection control and detail.

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: Pick your program and plan prerequisites

Days 1–30

Goal: Know exactly which accredited programs you will apply to and what they require.

- ☐ Look up your state dental board's licensing rules and accepted exams
- ☐ Use CODA's program search to list 3–5 accredited programs within reach
- ☐ Compare tuition, total cost, prerequisites, GPA cutoffs, and application deadlines
- ☐ Make a semester-by-semester plan for any missing prerequisites
- ☐ Request transcripts from every school you attended
- ☐ Contact two local offices to arrange dental hygiene observation hours

Phase 2: Build a strong application

Days 31–60

Goal: Strengthen grades, observation hours, and experience that admissions committees look for.

- ☐ Enroll in prerequisite courses and aim for A's in anatomy, chemistry, and microbiology
- ☐ Complete and document observation hours with a signed log
- ☐ Get CPR/BLS certified
- ☐ Consider part-time work as a dental assistant, receptionist, or sterilization tech
- ☐ Prepare for any required entrance test (such as the TEAS or HESI) if your programs use one
- ☐ Draft your personal statement explaining why you chose dental hygiene

Phase 3: Apply and fund your training

Days 61–90

Goal: Submit complete applications and line up money for school.

- [ ] Submit applications to every program on your list before the deadlines
- [ ] File the FAFSA and apply for ADHA Institute and local dental society scholarships
- [ ] Ask two references (a science instructor and a dental professional) for letters
- [ ] Practice for admissions interviews with the questions in this kit
- [ ] Budget for instruments, loupes, and board exam fees
- [ ] Set a backup plan, such as reapplying next cycle or working as a dental assistant

SECTION 5

Documents checklist

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

- [ ] High school diploma or GED and all college transcripts
- [ ] Prerequisite course completion records
- [ ] Signed dental hygiene observation log
- [ ] CPR/BLS card
- [ ] Immunization records and health screening forms
- [ ] Personal statement
- [ ] Two or three letters of recommendation
- [ ] Government-issued photo ID for exams and background checks
- [ ] FAFSA confirmation and scholarship applications
- [ ] Resume listing any dental office or healthcare experience

SECTION 6

Exams & how to prepare

National Board Dental Hygiene Examination (NBDHE)

What it is: Written exam from the JCNDE with 350 items: 200 discipline-based items and 150 case-based items built around patient cases. Accepted toward the written licensure requirement in all states.

How to prepare: 6–12 weeks of review using your program notes, JCNDE sample materials, and a board review course or question bank.

Clinical dental hygiene exam (ADEX or CRDTS)

What it is: Clinical skills exam, often on a manikin or patient, that tests calculus detection and removal, periodontal assessment, and related skills. Which agency's exam your state accepts varies by state.

How to prepare: Practice the exam procedures in your school clinic and follow the testing agency's candidate manual closely.

State jurisprudence exam

What it is: Many states require a test on the state dental practice act, scope of practice, and ethics.

How to prepare: A few days to two weeks reading your state's dental practice act and board rules.

SECTION 7

Interview questions

1. Why do you want to become a dental hygienist?

Tip: Talk about prevention and patient education, and give a real moment that sparked your interest.

2. What do you know about the hygienist's role versus the dental assistant's?

Tip: Show you understand licensure, scope of practice, and the focus on preventive care.

3. How would you calm an anxious patient?

Tip: Describe explaining each step, checking in, and letting them signal a pause.

4. How do you handle a heavy workload with strict standards?

Tip: Give an example from school or work where you stayed organized under pressure.

5. What would you do if you noticed a coworker skipping an infection control step?

Tip: Say you would address it promptly and follow office protocol; patient safety comes first.

6. How do you explain home care to a patient who is not interested?

Tip: Show you can adapt the message and use motivational, nonjudgmental language.

7. Tell me about a time you received critical feedback.

Tip: Pick a real example and focus on what you changed afterward.

8. How do you protect patient privacy?

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

9. How do you prepare for a demanding science course?

Tip: Describe a study system: schedule, practice questions, and study groups.

10. What experience do you have in a dental or healthcare setting?

Tip: Include observation hours, volunteering, or assisting, with specific tasks.

11. How would you handle a patient who refuses X-rays?

Tip: Explain the reason for the images, document the refusal, and involve the dentist.

12. Where do you see yourself five years after licensure?

Tip: Mention clinical growth, added permits allowed in your state, or a bachelor's degree.

SECTION 8

Resume bullet examples

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

- Completed supervised clinical dental hygiene training in a CODA-accredited program
- Performed periodontal charting, scaling, and polishing for 150+ patients in the school clinic
- Exposed and processed digital radiographs following ALARA principles
- Educated patients on brushing, flossing, and diet using individualized home care plans
- Followed CDC infection control and sterilization protocols in a busy clinic setting
- Documented treatment and medical histories accurately in dental practice software
- Passed the National Board Dental Hygiene Examination (NBDHE)
- Volunteered at community oral health screenings for children and older adults

SECTION 9

Common mistakes to avoid

1. Enrolling in a program that is not CODA-accredited, which can block licensure
2. Underestimating the cost of instruments, loupes, and board exams
3. Taking prerequisites casually when grades decide admission
4. Applying to only one program in a competitive year
5. Assuming every state accepts the same clinical exam without checking the dental board
6. Letting CPR certification lapse before clinic or licensure
7. Ignoring the physical strain of the job instead of learning good ergonomics early

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

- **CODA: Search accredited dental hygiene programs**

https://coda.ada.org

- **JCNDE: NBDHE information**

https://jcnde.ada.org/nbdhe

- **American Dental Hygienists' Association**

https://www.adha.org

- **ADEX exams (CDCA-WREB-CITA)**

https://adextesting.org

- **BLS: Dental Hygienists**

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

Salary

Bottom 10%	Median	Top 10%
Less than $74,880	**$98,100 per year ($47.16 per hour)**	More than $126,050

Outlook: BLS projects employment of dental hygienists to grow 8% from 2025 to 2035, much faster than the average for all occupations, with about 15,000 openings each year. There were about 225,300 dental hygienist jobs in 2025.

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

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