



## ***COVID-19 Messaging Tool Kit: Dental Care Should Continue During the Pandemic*** *December 2020*

The American Dental Association (ADA) and the Maine Dental Association (MDA) firmly believe that dental care can continue to be delivered safely. Guidance recommended by the ADA, the MDA, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) continues to safeguard the health of the public.

Dental care is essential health care. Regular dental visits are important because treatment, as well as prevention of dental disease, helps keep people healthy. Dentistry has one of the lowest rates of COVID-19. (To date, there has been no documented transmission of COVID-19 in a clinical dental setting and in research published by the Journal of the American Dental Association the prevalence of COVID-19 among dentists was found to be less than 1%.<sup>1</sup>)

According to the US Surgeon General, oral health is essential to the general health and well-being of all Americans and is a window to the health of the body. Regular dental visits are important, and the longer patients go without preventive care and treatment for early forms of dental disease, the more likely their untreated disease will progress. Untreated tooth decay can lead to infection, increased patient pain and expense, or even tooth loss.

Dentists have long used extensive infection control techniques to protect their patients and the dental team. The ADA developed an extensive Return to Work Tool kit that builds upon the already strong infection prevention protocols in place in dental offices and gives dental professionals the information they need to practice as safely as possible. In addition, the MDA developed Maine specific Re-opening Guidelines to assist dental practices to safely reopen during this pandemic. Both documents can be accessed at: [www.medental.org/COVID](http://www.medental.org/COVID).

As we see a surge of COVID-19 cases in Maine, dental practices are prepared to safely remain open and provide essential dental care to patients. This care is necessary for people to maintain their health and their livelihoods. In addition, providing needed dental care to patients alleviates the burden that urgent dental care visits would place on hospitals that are already feeling the strain of this pandemic.

The following pages are talking points that practices may wish to use in communicating with their patients that maintaining oral health is critical and the safety of patients, dentists and dental team members has, and always will be, our utmost concern.

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<sup>1</sup> Estrich, Cameron, MPH, PhD, et al. Estimating COVID-19 prevalence and infection control practices among US dentists. JADA 2020;151(11):815-824 Open access: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adaj.2020.09.005>. Accessed December 7, 2020.

### **Sample Message #1: It Is Safe to See Your Dentist**

If you have been putting off a trip to the dentist, you should know that it is not only safe, but crucial, that you come back for the care you need.

Dental offices in Maine were closed in March and April for all but emergency procedures to comply with guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Fortunately, on May 18 dental offices were able to resume non-emergency care and continue to follow detailed guidelines from the American Dental Association and the Maine Dental Association in order to safely provide dental care to patients.

This pandemic has impacted so much of our lives, but patients should know that we are taking every precaution and have enhanced already-strict standards of infection control for sanitizing our surroundings and instruments, providing proper personal protective equipment (PPE) to all our staff, enforcing mask requirements for patients, and implementing social distancing measures for waiting rooms and offices.

Oral health is essential for good overall health. As you think about everything you can do to continue to stay safe and healthy during this global pandemic, the dental team at ***[insert name of practice]*** stands ready to deliver critical and essential oral health care to you and all of our patients.

### **Message #2: Oral Health Care is Essential**

- According to the U.S. Surgeon General, oral health is essential to the general health and well-being of all Americans and is a window into the health of the body.
- Continuing regular dental visits is important because treatment, as well as prevention of dental disease, helps keep people healthy.
- The longer patients go without preventive care and treatment for early forms of dental disease, the more likely their untreated disease will progress. Untreated tooth decay can lead to infection, increased patient pain and expense, or even tooth loss.
- Untreated dental infections can spread throughout the body and become life threatening. People may not realize they have an abscess and yet the infection may spread and could negatively affect the body to the point where a person may need to be hospitalized.
- As some states see a resurgence in COVID-19 cases, dental practices are prepared to safely remain open and provide essential dental care to patients.
- Essential dental care is care that prevents and eliminates infection and preserves the structure and function of teeth, gums and other parts of the mouth. This care is necessary for people to maintain their health and livelihoods.

### **Message #3: Regular Dental Care Helps Keep Patients with Oral Health Crises Out of Hospitals and Hospital Emergency Departments**

- Providing needed dental care to patients alleviates the burden that urgent dental care visits would place on hospitals.
- Many states have seen a dramatic surge in inpatient hospitalizations due to suspected and confirmed COVID-19 patients, resulting in dangerously low bed availability for trauma cases and those suffering from critical illnesses. Closing or scaling back services provided at dental offices would exacerbate this problem and further burden hospital emergency departments.
- There are more than 2 million visits every year to hospital emergency rooms for dental pain – these ED visits can be referred to dental offices, potentially saving the healthcare system \$1.7 billion and ensuring that people are receiving the appropriate care.
- Visits to the ED for dental pain are costly and can range from \$400 to \$1,500 compared to a \$90 to \$200 visit to a dentist. The most extreme cases of untreated dental infections have cost hundreds of thousands of dollars in hospitalization and some have tragically ended in needless death.
- The American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP) supports dentistry services as essential in helping to reduce the strain on hospital emergency departments around the country.

### **Message #4: Dentists are Infection Control Experts**

- Dentists have long used extensive infection control techniques to protect their patients and the dental team. The ADA's Return to Work Interim Guidance & the MDA Re-Opening Guidelines build upon the already strong infection prevention protocols in place in dental offices and give dental professionals the information they need to practice as safely as possible.
- The guidance includes specific recommendations before, during and after dental appointments, as well as recommendations for keeping patients and staff safe.
- Like hospitals and other clinical settings, dental offices have procedures to handle patients or team members who may become COVID-19 positive. Just as hospitals do not close, dentists, as infection control experts, can assess the correct next steps for their offices.
- Maintaining Oral Health is critical.
- The safety of patients, dentists and dental team members has and always will be the ADA's utmost concert.
- Without compromising safety, dentists and their teams stand ready to address oral health needs. Oral health won't "take a break" during a pandemic.