

How To Choose a Dentist

By Mike Dunn

A good first step in choosing a dentist is to ask neighbors, friends and coworkers about the family dentist they have chosen. This is especially helpful if you are moving to a new community and haven't had time to become acclimated to your surroundings.

If there is one dentist who is mentioned frequently and you like what you are hearing, the next step is to schedule a visit to meet him or her and get acquainted. The purpose is to see if you feel comfortable with this person and his dental practices. After all, the dentist you choose will be working on your teeth and the teeth of your spouse and children for possibly a long time. Ask the prospective dentist about his philosophy of health care. You might be surprised at the answer you receive. Ask about fees, payment plans, and insurance coverage. You know what your financial situation is, so it is proper for you to initiate the discussion.

How did the dentist and his or her staff respond to you? Was there a professional atmosphere in the office? Did the dentist and staff take the time to listen to your concerns and seem genuinely interested? A dentist who seems too rushed or too busy to take the time to get acquainted may not have the time to address your personal needs and concerns down the road and is probably not the one you want.

Something else to consider is the size of the dentist office. This isn't always the case, but sometimes a dentist with a large practice and a large staff has little time to devote to individual patients. He or she is too busy working and keeping up with the cost of the practice! Large dental practices are more likely than smaller ones to hurry patients through without taking the time for proper examinations or thought to what is actually best for the patient. First and foremost, you want a dentist who has your best tooth care and treatment in mind.

You can also make evaluations about a prospective dentist after your initial examination. Did the dentist take the time to do a thorough exam so that no problems or potential problems are missed? A thorough dental examination includes not only inspection of the teeth and gums, but also of the tongue, lips, inside of the cheek, palate, and the skin of the face and neck, plus feeling the neck for abnormal lymph nodes and enlargement of the thyroid gland. A good dentist is also on the alert for periodontal (gum) disease. Did the dentist check for signs and symptoms of periodontal disease such as bleeding from the gums and/or pockets of decay? After the exam, did the dentist establish goals for your long-term care?

In March of 1997, Consumers Research provided a number of questions for consumers to ask themselves after they have received treatment from a dentist. These help determine the level of the dentist's skill.

Here are the questions: How does your bite feel? Is any of the dental work irritating your gum? Does the treated tooth look like a tooth? Does dental floss or your tongue catch on the tooth? Did the dentist take time to polish your fillings? Do you feel pain when drinking hot or cold liquids? Was any debris left in your mouth after treatment? Does the dentist use a water spray to cool your teeth while drilling?

Other things to watch out for in evaluating a prospective dentist are an emphasis on mass production rather than quality care; an emphasis on cosmetic procedures and one-visit comprehensive treatments; and the routine use of intravenous sedation.

Your dentist should be someone in whose judgment you trust. You are entrusting to the dentist the long-term tooth care of your family. Asking the right questions ahead of time can help to assure you of making an informed decision that you won't regret in the years to come.

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