

A Few Good Questions: A Guide to Choosing Your New Dentist

There are many reasons for seeking a new dentist. You may have moved to another neighborhood or a different city altogether. Perhaps your current dentist is retiring, your needs have changed or you are dissatisfied with the service you are receiving.

When you choose a new dentist, you are making an important decision for you and your family. You are entrusting care for a key part of your overall wellness to someone with whom you've had no prior experience.

Most of us rely on recommendations from family and friends or other health care practitioners as we consider our options for dental care. These days, people often supplement that with information gathered online. However, the needs and wants of others may or may not match yours, and it's hard to tell from a website what a dental practice is truly like. That's why the three-step approach described in this article can often yield better results.

Establish Basic Criteria

The first step is to establish the basic criteria for a dental care provider. For most of us, the first is proximity to home, work or school. It's easier to keep appointments if the dentist's office is nearby.

A second criterion is whether you and your family have any special needs. For example, you may want a dentist who specializes in care of young children or a practitioner who has a handicap-accessible office if you have a disability.

A third key factor is whether the dentist is part of a Delta Dental network¹. Delta Dental dentists must meet professionally recognized standards for quality, so you can rest assured that our dentists are properly licensed and follow accepted standards for cleanliness and safety procedures. Since local Delta Dental representatives maintain an ongoing relationship with our providers and require them to be re-credentialed at least once every four years, you know their standards are maintained.



Also, dentists in Delta Dental networks agree to pre-determined fees that often are discounted from typical charges. As part of their network participation, they agree not to "balance bill" patients for differences between the pre-determined fees and typical charges in your area. Visiting a network dentist offers the best value for subscribers overall.

To build your initial list of dentists, you can contact your local dental society. Or, as a Delta Dental subscriber, you have access to our online dentist directory at www.deltadental.com. You can search by plan, location, maximum travel distance, languages spoken, treatment hours and special office features. Since Delta Dental has the nation's largest group of dental experts, you are almost certain to find several good choices in your area.

Work the Phone

Once you have a list of three or four potential dental care providers, you can do your initial research over the telephone. When you call a practice, get answers to these questions to help you gauge whether the dental practice can meet your needs.

1. What should I expect during the first exam?

The answer should include a conversation with the dentist about your general and oral health history and concerns, including information about any diseases or conditions you have and any medications you are taking. They should also mention that you'll be given a thorough examination of all teeth, including any restorative work you've had done; a thorough check of gum health with a periodontal probe; a check for signs of oral cancer; and x-rays, as needed.

2. Will clinic staff review my treatment options and costs before work is done? It's important to make sure you have the right information, including what's covered by your dental plan before making treatment decisions.

3. What are the dentist office's hours of operation, and how are patient emergencies handled outside regular hours? You will want to find a practice with office hours that are convenient for your schedule. It's also a good idea to inquire about when the next available appointments are, as many busy practices are scheduled months in advance. In the case of an emergency, most dentists make arrangements with a colleague or an emergency referral service if they can't attend to urgent needs.

4. How has the dentist kept abreast of new developments in dentistry? Dentists and practice staff use continuing education courses, seminars and trade shows to learn about new techniques and technologies to make sure you have the best treatment options.

In addition to getting answers to these four questions, use this as an opportunity to gauge how you were treated by the office staff. A staff of courteous, friendly people can help alleviate anxiety about a dental procedure and make your visit more enjoyable.

Then it's time to make an appointment with the practice you think best meets your needs.

Test Your Choice

Continue your observations during your first office visit. A welcoming reception area and a clean and neat office environment are often signs of a well-run practice.

Note how promptly you are greeted and how long you're asked to wait before being treated. While it's not realistic to expect the practice to always be right on schedule, it is reasonable to expect to be told within a few minutes of your arrival whether there will be a delay.

Once you are in the exam room, make note of how comfortable you feel with the environment and the staff. Do they seem engaged or hurried? Make sure the hygienist and dentist take time to listen carefully to your questions or concerns. Note how thorough the exam is – a first visit should include:

- A check of all your teeth for decay and the condition of any existing fillings, crowns, or other existing dental work.
- A thorough check of gum health with a periodontal probe, a tiny measuring instrument to measure where the gum attaches to the tooth root.
- A check for signs of oral cancer or other diseases in your mouth, neck, lips, tongue, throat, tissues and gums.
- X-rays may also be taken at the dentist's order to provide additional diagnostic information.

Finally, following your exam, the dentist should present a plan for ongoing treatment – whether it's a schedule of regular checkups or appointments for more extensive dental work – as well as the risks, alternatives, costs and benefits. Before you leave, make sure the dentist or staff member clearly explains how they handle insurance and billing.

Taking time to ask these questions and to make careful observations of the practice will help you make the right choice of a dentist who will best serve your needs. You'll have peace of mind knowing that you are in the best hands for what you want in care that will enhance both your oral health and your smile.

¹ Delta Dental Premier® and Delta Dental PPOSM plans give you full control in choosing your dentist. You can see any dentist you wish, and you don't need to tell us if you decide to change dentists. Members of Delta Dental DHMO and DeltaCare plans are required to visit a specific set of dentists. Check your benefit plan booklet for details, or visit www.deltadental.com.