



# Adapting to the New Normal in Dentistry

Building Sustainable,  
Growing Dental Practices

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# Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on the relationship many Americans have with their dentist.

Nearly half of Americans reported delaying going to the dentist or getting dental care due to the pandemic. Among adults who reported delaying dental care due to the pandemic, 74.7% reported delaying a checkup, 12.4% reported delaying care to address something that was bothering them, and 10.5% reported delaying care to get planned treatment.<sup>1</sup>

This has not only had a negative impact on the financial health of many dental practices but has had negative health consequences as well. According to a recent survey:<sup>2</sup>

- More than half of adults (55%) reported some type of oral health problem.
- More than half of adults with an oral health problem did not seek care, and one-quarter of them did not seek care because they could not afford it.
- In 2022, the most frequently cited dental problems were: toothache (23%); cracked or broken teeth (18%); swollen or bleeding gums (17%); and frequent dry mouth (17%).

The dental industry faces a daunting array of potential disruptions — like fuel surcharges on delivery of dental supplies from dental labs, supply chain disruptions due

to geopolitical factors, demographic changes, and even severe weather events.

Building a sustainable practice has never been a more urgent concern. Organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the American Dental Association (ADA), OSHA (Occupational Health and Safety Administration), and a host of others offer information to help dental providers navigate difficult times.<sup>3</sup>

Finding the right resources and information to stay up to date on emerging trends and best practices can be a full-time job when providers are focused on building and operating a sustainable practice. This guide compiles expert information and resources from a range of health agencies, industry experts, and organizations to support you. The guide provides resources to help you safeguard your patients and your team as you implement new standards of care, new patient outreach programs, and even new technology.

**More than half of adults with an oral health problem did not seek care in 2022.<sup>2</sup>**

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# Prepare Your Office for Long-Term Disruption

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the dental industry's vulnerability to unexpected global disruptions. Preparing and equipping your office to maximize safety and security is now a business requirement. This includes having a communication plan, equipment, safety protocols, and staff training to minimize risks within your clinical environment.

Sourcing personal protective equipment (PPE) has become a top concern for dental practices. Now that supply disruptions have lessened, the costs have come down a bit, and the regulations have become normalized, offices must stockpile KN95 or N95 masks, head coverings, surgical masks, face shields, and gowns. A recent study found that employing careful health practices not only controls infections and protects vulnerable patients but can help maintain clinic solvency and head off provider burnout.<sup>4</sup>

The pandemic also revealed weak spots in supply chains. Dental offices often rely on supplier loyalty programs to help keep costs down, which means they typically only buy from a certain supplier. While in the past that has been an effective way to manage supplies and costs, moving forward, practices will need to develop a more dynamic, broader supply chain.

**Your dental practice cannot go back to the same communications plans, safety protocols, and staff training you've always used.**

# Prepare Your Office for Long-Term Disruption (continued)

## **WHY IS COVID STILL A THREAT ?**

The CDC is tracking multiple variants at any time, some of which cause more infections and spread faster than the original SARS-CoV-2 strain of the virus.<sup>6</sup> As new variants of the COVID-19 virus, Monkeypox, and other diseases erupt, dental and medical practices will have to remain vigilant and proactive, protecting staff, patients, and immunocompromised individuals. Dental practices will face steep obstacles navigating this next normal, which includes supply chain disruptions, concerns about patient and employee safety, and economic and workforce issues.

**For additional resources to help you create a PPE shortage preparedness plan, visit the CDC's [website](#).**

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a silver smartphone. The phone is held horizontally, and the hand is visible from the bottom and right sides. A light blue speech bubble with a white border is positioned in the upper left quadrant of the image, containing the text "We're looking forward to seeing you!". The background is blurred, showing a person's face and a blue object.

We're looking forward to seeing you!

## Communicating the New Normal

To help patients feel more comfortable and ease them back into a good dental relationship, your practice needs to communicate and engage in targeted outreach with them. When communicating with patients, focus on messaging that promotes confidence, trust, safety, and reassurance. Inform patients that your office staff is knowledgeable and up to date on the latest news and safety measures related to ongoing health concerns. Ensure them that your office can adapt and make necessary changes to protocols when needed.

Your communications schedule needs to be more involved than just reaching out for an annual checkup. You also need to be sensitive towards individuals who

might still be concerned about being exposed at your office, immunocompromised, or in need of special consideration. It may be difficult to manage this kind of increased levels of support, especially if you are still understaffed. However, Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based tools make it possible to automate and maximize your scheduling.

In addition, your emails, newsletters, and social media might inform existing and new patients what to expect when they arrive for their appointment. This may include any safety protocols that were put in place to minimize the risk of exposure. Offer special accommodations for patients with comorbidities or health concerns.

# Communicating the New Normal (continued)

## HOW TO COMMUNICATE CONFIDENCE, TRUST, AND SAFETY WITH PATIENTS

The first step is reintroducing your practice to your patients.

Do not rely on the same appointment reminders you have always used. Telling someone that it has been three years since their last checkup (or however long it may be) can backfire. They might take it as a personal attack for something they had no control over (especially if your office was unable to take appointments for a period). Even worse, some patients might think that if they have avoided the dentist for this long and their teeth feel fine, then there is no reason to return.

Your communications plan should gently reengage your patients, reassure them, and offer concrete details about how your practice will safely serve them. Share office policies, procedures, and enhanced safety protocols.

If your practice is following the most current CDC and ADA guidelines, studies show that COVID-19 infection rates among dentists are very low and remain lower than rates for other healthcare workers. A study published in June 2021, for example, found that monthly infection rates for dentists were as low as 0.2%.

Thanks to social media, dentists can take patient engagement a step further by providing a glimpse

into the office's daily operations. In addition to telling patients about new safety protocols through email, publish photos, memes, and videos on social media to engage and reassure. Here are some specific ideas:

- Post short videos of cleaning protocols before and after each appointment so patients can see what measures are being taken to maintain a safe environment. (Share the link after an appointment is made to help the patient feel more comfortable for the visit.)
- Film a walk-through to show patients what to expect during their next visit.
- Post testimonials from other patients.
- Post selfie videos offering tips and support to show patients how much you understand and value them.

**For additional resources to help you communicate with patients effectively visit the American Dental Association's [website](#).**

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# Communicating the New Normal (continued)

## PROTECTING STAFF AND PATIENTS

### Before an appointment:

- Use a scheduling app or online tool to allow patients to schedule appointments.
- Call or text a pre-appointment screening.

### At the appointment:

- Allow patients to wait in their cars or outside the facility, where they can be contacted by mobile phone when it is their turn for dental care. They can be brought directly into the treatment area without visiting the waiting room.
- Offer paperless check-in and billing options.

### After the appointment:

- Inquire about their experiences to demonstrate you care. It also provides your practice with helpful data.
- Invite them to share their experiences on social media. Positive testimonies from friends and family can reassure others that it's safe to resume dental care.
- Keep the relationship strong by providing dental care resources. Some dental service providers offer videos on a variety of topics from flossing to eating well.



### PREVENTIVE MEASURES AND STANDARDS COVID-19



#### 1. Cleaning and hygiene measures

- Extended cleaning frequency throughout the hotel
- Constant disinfection of surfaces and utensils
- Expansion of disinfectant dispensers and doormats at entrances
- Regular airing and cleaning of the air conditioning systems



#### 2. Adaptation of facilities and service

- Online Check-in before arrival
- Extension of opening hours in restaurant
- Capacity reduction in public areas
- Distance rules
- Buffet serving by cooks and additional show cooking

#### 3. Information and training

## Sustainable Safety Protocols

Thanks to the evolution of the safety protocols, hygienists, dental assistants, and dentists have been able to build a safe environment for dental professionals and patients.

Increased aerosolization due to the nature of dental care is a common risk factor for dental workers across all airborne viruses. Controlling aerosols, which is essential to preventing the spread of airborne diseases, is particularly challenging in a dental setting, where aerosols are routinely released into the air during treatment or cleanings. Managing the risk involves creating an efficient workflow of rotating chairs, aerosol mitigation and increased disinfectant protocols.<sup>8</sup>

Safety protocols that reduce exposure to airborne virus particles, such as wearing KN95/N95 masks, face shields, head/foot covers and gowns, provide an additional layer of protection.

- Routine testing for staff, hand sanitizer for patients and staff, and physical distancing of patients and staff, are sustainable safety measures to help protect staff and patients from a range of viral and airborne health threats.

- Patient communication will also need to change. Contactless scheduling and paperwork practices can help reduce the risk of transmission while also helping to comfort concerned patients.
- The American Dental Association (ADA) offers a patient screening form that practices can use to help screen patients for COVID-19 in advance of their appointment.

Practices should think about exploring nontraditional and creative options to solve safety issues around infection transmission and disease containment. For example, nonroutine opening hours such as evenings or on weekends may increase patient occupancy rates.

Individual patient rooms are preferred for the provision of dental treatment. If you have an open floor plan, erect barriers of some kind and ensure at least six feet of space between patient chairs. Your ventilation system is key in mitigating the spread of COVID-19 through airborne particles - along with patient placement during treatment and other facility considerations.

- Physical barriers between patient chairs should be easy to clean and not interfere with fire sprinkler systems.
- If possible, rooms should be aligned with the direction of airflow into the space to help with dispersing airborne particles.
- Patient rooms should be directed with a patient's head away from corridors, near the return vents, or towards the rear wall when there are open layouts. Consult with an HVAC professional to ensure the chairs are appropriately positioned.

One way to reengage with patients is teledentistry services, allowing patients to consult with otherwise unavailable medical professionals. Such services make it possible to capture images, send relevant

information to a dentist remotely, and engage in a live consult. The dentist might start a video chat with the patient to build rapport, help connect with them, earn their trust/confidence, and bring them into the office (if necessary).

In addition, you may not even need to invest in spectacular new technology to win back your patients. Patients who have been away for a while may not even know all the services and technology you may offer. Begin by telling patients about tools you may have in the office - like diode lasers, same-day crowns, computer-assisted designed (CAD) bridges and crowns, anesthesia without needles, or 3D digital imaging. If you have had these tools, services, and conveniences in your practice for years, you may take these for granted, but your patients might be surprised to learn about it.

## FACTS TO SHARE

COVID-19 clusters are unlikely to occur in dental and oral surgical care settings if appropriate protective measures are implemented. Measures including controlling splash and/or aerosol, surgical gloves, face/eye guards, and face masks aprons, dental suction device, and cleaning and/or covering of potentially contaminated surfaces. In seven facilities, no transmission passed from patient to medical staff, even though some patients were found to have been infected.

The study showed the cumulative infection rate for U.S. dentists is 2.6%, with the monthly incidence rate ranging from 0.2% to 1.1% per month. By comparison, in June 2020, the cumulative COVID-19 prevalence rate for other U.S. health professionals ranged from 3.3% to 35.3%.<sup>9</sup>

Share this research with your patients to help them gain confidence and trust in dentistry.



# Sustainable Work Cultures

Dental workers continue to face unique, heightened risks. Creating a safe work culture that puts your people first can help build a resilient workforce.

In recent years, dental practices could sometimes access funds from COVID-19 Economic Injury Disaster Loans. However, such funding might not always be available, so put aside cash reserves to retain staff in economic downturns or industry disruptions. Nonfinancial incentives could include recognition or rewards such as verbal recognition in front of peers and/or patients, upgrades to workspaces, training opportunities, flexible work schedules, additional paid time off, and gift cards or vouchers for free lunches.

To create a safety preparedness and response plan that can help guide your practice, you can adopt these protective actions in response to emerging health crises or other safety concerns.

- Review updated guidance from federal, state, local, tribal and/or territorial health agencies about emerging health concerns.
- Follow federal, state, local and industry recommendations when developing crisis contingency plans.

- Assess the level of risk associated with various work sites and job tasks.
- Determine workers' individual risk factors (e.g., age; presence of chronic medical conditions, including immunocompromising conditions; pregnancy, etc.).
- Establish nonoccupational risk factors at home and in community settings.
- Create a response plan for staff and patients with clear policies and procedures.

**For additional resources to help you create a safety preparedness plan, visit OSHA's [website](#).**

**Creating a work culture that puts your people first can help build a resilient workforce.**

## SUPPORT WORKERS DURING UNCERTAIN ECONOMIC TIMES

While building a sustainable practice will help protect your staff from economic disruptions, an unanticipated crisis may still emerge that could affect business operations. Post-pandemic, COVID variants and other issues such as gas prices, inflation, or possibly recession can disrupt your staff's lives. Here's how you can support your workers in the face of economic uncertainty.

- Examine employee benefits, wellness, and incentives programs that can provide robust health, financial, and leave benefits. Gas cards and public transit vouchers can help with staff retention.
- Tap cash reserves to protect staff from furloughs if possible.
- Search available economic support options intended to protect workers.

- If furloughs become essential to maintaining the future financial health of the practice, communicate this decision clearly and with compassion.
- Share resources with terminated employees, such as information regarding benefits and local unemployment resources.
- Keep lines of communication open with furloughed employees.

**For additional resources to help you support workers during an economic downturn, visit the [American Dental Association](#), and listen to Unum's HR Trends podcast, "[How the Pandemic is Reshaping Employee Benefits](#)."**



# Invest in Your Relationship with Patients

Patients may still have reservations about routine medical appointments, including dental care. Clear and open communication with patients is key to overcoming this hesitancy. Patients may be less aware than dentists of the critical importance of dental health and may see routine dental care or orthodontic treatment as optional in this current environment.

**According to the ADA, 86% of practices said their schedules were still not full. The main reasons listed were:**

- 82% Patient cancellations
- 36% Not enough patients making appointments
- 37% Trouble filling vacant staff positions
- 12.4% COVID safety protocols<sup>11</sup>

**Reassure patients of your commitment to safety and inform them about the policies and procedures you've put into place.**



# Leverage the Power of Networks

## **PARTNERING WITH INSURANCE CARRIERS AND THEIR NETWORKS OF PARTICIPATING PROVIDERS CAN OFFER OPPORTUNITIES TO HELP YOUR PRACTICE GROW.**

Work with your network's provider service team to learn about new groups with members in your area and make sure your directory information is current for members, employers, brokers, and other groups. Keep an updated list of the insurance plans and networks you participate on your website. Membership in a network offers opportunities for practices to build sustainable growth.

Networks that are utilized by dental benefit carriers with a large membership base can help drive more patients to your chairs, along with full or partial coverage for preventive, basic, and major services. If you are not an in-network provider, consider joining before open enrollment begins. Dental benefits carriers promoting your practice to their group clients and employees (members) at the time of year when new groups become effective is critical to growing your practice.

All carriers and networks will list your practice in their directory on their website. Benefits providers can also help grow your practice by highlighting services to individuals and groups who inquire about providers in your area. Leveraging the power of a robust network can have a dramatic impact on the long-term growth and sustainability of your practice.

Providing clear communication about dental benefits is critical to retaining patients. You want them to understand the value of the dental care they receive. The benefits employers provide are also extremely valuable. Framing patient benefits in a positive way can make clear the value of their dental benefits in helping pay for the costs of preventive and major services.

Filing timely claims also plays a critical role in a sustainable practice. Dental practices now more than ever, need quick payment turnaround. Practices that have experienced lost revenue and dramatic increases in supplies costs need to get revenue streams flowing again. Prompt benefits claim payments are essential for many cash-strapped practices.

Benefit carriers who offer connections to electronic claims processing clearinghouses through dental practice software, or other forms of electronic claim filing and attachment submission, provide a huge value to practices who want to get paid faster and reduce the amount of time needed to process claims.

# Leverage the Power of Networks (continued)

## **MAXIMIZE THE POWER OF CONTRACTED NETWORKS**

- Along with updated information on how the office is protecting staff and patients, keep your website updated with the dental insurance carriers, benefits plans and networks you participate in, and provide links to their online member portals.
  - Join networks before open enrollment begins if possible.
  - Make sure your contracted networks or benefit plans list your practice on their website and other directories. Help them keep their directories up to date when your address changes, new providers join your practice, etc.
  - Communicate proactively with your patients about their benefits related to your services.
  - Use language in patient billing that is consistent with benefits plans and networks' explanations of benefits (EOBs) to reduce confusion about bills.
- Take advantage of options like electronic claim and attachment submission, clearinghouses and electronic funds transfer or virtual payments to speed up claim processing and payment.

**Providing clear communication about dental benefits is critical to retaining patients.**



## Building a Sustainable Business Model

**DENTAL PRACTICES ARE TRYING TO FIND WAYS TO DRIVE STABLE REVENUE DESPITE ECONOMIC CHALLENGES. EMBRACING CREATIVE SOLUTIONS WILL HELP.**

A strong and productive hygiene program generates income to help cover a practice's overhead and operating costs. Filled hygiene and restorative schedules, along with elective procedures and orthodontic services provide the revenue that can help generate profitability. A significant decline in the ability to offer these services, along with extra costs to protect patients and staff or for shipping, can prohibit practices from maintaining adequate revenue.

Managing cash reserves to weather economic disruptions in the future will be critical for maintaining business stability. Some practices closed offices and furloughed staff when faced with the shutdown orders, while others applied for the Payroll Protection Program. Other dentists used private reserves and savings to pay employees and keep offices running until patient visits and revenue returned closer to pre-pandemic levels. Whatever choice you make could have a long-term effect on your staff, patient relationships, and the financial health of your practice.

# Building a Sustainable Business Model

(continued)

## **BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE**

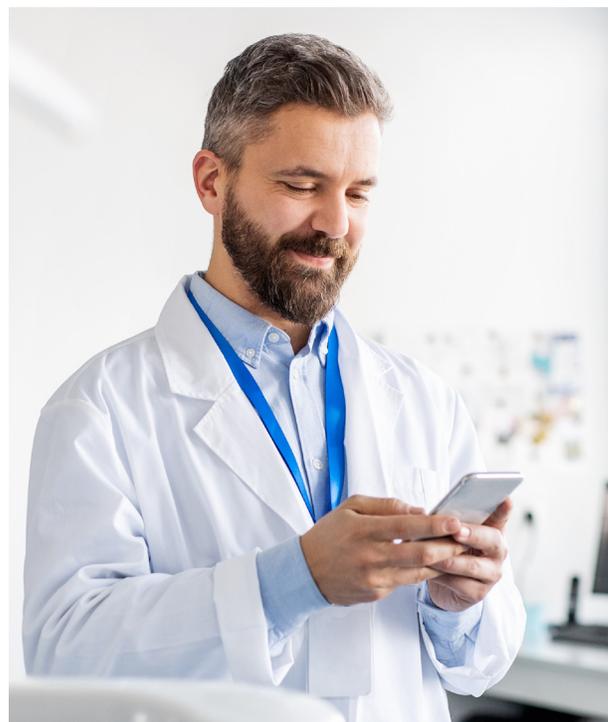
- Maximize network participation to generate exposure to more potential patients and payors.
- Invest in technology-based solutions, such as AI-powered scheduling and staffing tools to maximize space and workforce availability while maintaining safety.
- Build a sustainable supply chain by sourcing local options for dental supplies, such as crowns and bridges to provide long-term supply stability.
- Evaluate cash reserves to help weather economic disruptions and maintain business stability.

**For additional resources related to maintaining a sustainable business model, visit the American Association of Orthodontists' [website](#).**

# Conclusion

Dental practices have had to evolve following the COVID-19 pandemic. Managing the new normal means leveraging the power of a dental network can help your practice grow.

**Contact us today to register for the Unum Dental Network. Our network includes over 800,000 insured members and supports plans offered by Unum Dental®, Colonial Life Dental, and Starmount Dental. To register, email [ProviderAdvocates@unum.com](mailto:ProviderAdvocates@unum.com).**



# Resources

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