

Dental Assisting Career Paths

Dental Assistant Requirements in Tennessee: A formal education at a Dental Assistant School can go a long way.

Tennessee regulates the dental assisting profession. All dental assistants are expected to register with the Board unless they are in the process of receiving on-the-job training or are completing their education through an accredited program. Registration standards are minimal. However, some duties and functions are dependent on completing state-mandated training.

In some cases, a dental assistant can qualify for multiple authorizations through completion of a single formal educational program.

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Becoming a Registered Dental Assistant in Tennessee

In Tennessee, the RDA is a relatively basic credential. Requirements are lower than in some states. A dental assistant is not required to demonstrate formal education in dental assisting. However, he or she must document having reached the age of 18 and having graduated from high school or attained a GED. The person will need to have an acceptable legal and professional background and will need to have a Basic Life Support (BLS) or CPR/ AED course at the appropriate level.

Achieving Dental Radiography Certification in Tennessee

RDA status alone is not sufficient to perform x-ray duties. A dental assistant may, however, achieve radiography certification in any of several ways. The required coursework may be included as part of a dental assisting program that is approved by the Tennessee Board or accredited by the Commission on Dental Accreditation; the latter is the accrediting arm of the American Dental Association.

The dental assistant may meet requirements by taking the Dental Assisting National Board (DANB) Radiation Health and Safety (RHS) Examination. This is a computer-delivered examination. There are no prerequisites, but pre-registration is required. The Tennessee licensing agency will also accept the DANB Certified Dental Assistant (CDA) credential as evidence that requirements have been met. The RHS is included as one component of the CDA examination. However, there are additional components, and prerequisites must be met before the qualifying examination is taken. CDA candidates who did not complete accredited programs can achieve certification only after meeting experience requirements.

An RDA can enroll in a state-approved radiology course post-registration. Out-of-state coursework can also be considered. In order to perform radiography duties prior to certification, though, a person must be enrolled in an accredited or Board-approved dental assisting program (<http://www.danb.org/en/Meet-State-Requirements/State-Specific-Information/Tennessee.aspx>).

Dental Assistant Qualifying in Expanded Functions

A student who completes an accredited dental assisting program may receive the training necessary to qualify for multiple Board-approved functions. An RDA may also pursue coursework in individual expanded functions. The following is a summation of requirements:

Coronal Polishing: The student will complete a course that includes clinical and didactic instruction and testing. Tennessee-approved courses are at least 14 hours and include curriculum described in Board rule. Students must score at least 75% on both the clinical and written tests. Board rule authorizes two retakes.

Some students will take the required coursework as part of their initial coursework in a CODA-accredited dental assisting program; they will provide letters from the program stating that coronal polishing was included in the curriculum.

A course completed in another state can be accepted if it is determined to be equivalent.

Sealants: RDAs may pursue training through Board-approved courses. Tennessee-approved courses are at least six hours and include at least four hours of clinical work. Again, this may be included as part of a CODA-accredited program. It may also be included as part of a Tennessee-approved dental assisting program.

Individuals who obtain experience in other than a CODA-accredited program will apply for a temporary permit that allows them to meet externship requirements. Supervising dentists will verify that sealants were successfully placed on all required teeth.

Nitrous Oxide Monitoring: Nitrous oxide coursework may be completed as part of the initial dental assisting program or completed through a Board-approved course; in the latter instance, the dental assistant must be registered as an RDA.

Qualifying in Restorative and Prosthetic Functions

Restorative and prosthetic functions are among the most advanced duties. A dental assistant will need two years of recent experience in order to be admitted to a restorative and prosthetics course; experience is to be from the prior three years.

Again, a dental assistant who completed a comparable program in another state may present credentials to the licensing agency.

The Application Process

Application forms can be downloaded from the website of the Tennessee Board of Dentistry (<https://www.tn.gov/health/article/Dentistry-applications>). The applicant will need to provide documentation of citizenship or legal residency and a signed passport-type photograph.

He or she will also be required to provide two letters from dental professionals; the purpose is to attest to good character.

The application includes questions about legal and professional history. An applicant who has dental assistance in the United States or Canada will need to provide verification.

Certification and registration are separate processes. There is a separate application for RDAs seeking certification in 1) sealants and 2) other expanded functions. The fee is \$15 for each function sought.

Those seeking recognition based on out-of-state courses are directed to request a letter directly from the course provider; documentation is to include the number of hours. The applicant will write the name of the state on his or her application. (In-state providers generally send student information automatically.)

RDA certificates must be renewed every other year. Expanded functions permits are valid only when the dental assistant has a valid RDA certificate.

Additional Information

Information is available from the Tennessee Board of Dentistry (<https://www.tn.gov/health/health-program-areas/oralhealth/professionals/tennessee-board-of-dentistry.html>). Scope of practice and delegable procedures are listed in Chapter 0460-04 of Board Rule (<https://www.tn.gov/health/health-program-areas/health-professional-boards/dentistry-board/dentistry-board/statutes-and-rules.html>).

The Board can be reached at 615-532-3202.