



Choosing a Dental Specialist or a Dentist Who Specializes

Today's dental patients are able to choose from a variety of innovative procedures, from dental implants that may improve their smile and their ability to eat and speak, to adult braces made from clear, almost invisible materials. When choosing a dental professional to provide the service, however, many patients may not understand the difference between a dental specialist and dentists who say they "specialize" in a particular procedure. It is an important distinction that could affect the outcome of your dental procedure.

What is a Dental Specialist?

Dental specialists are dentists who, after completing dental school, further their education by completing a multiple year residency in a specific dental specialty area.

The American Dental Association's Council on Dental Education and Licensure currently recognizes only nine dental specialties:

- Dental Public Health
- Endodontics
- Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology
- Oral and Maxillofacial Radiology
- Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery
- Orthodontics and Dentofacial Orthopedics
- Pediatric Dentistry
- Periodontics
- Prosthodontists

Dental specialists, as a result of their extensive training in their specialty area, have performed more procedures than dentists who "specialize" in a particular practice area. In addition, the specialist is better prepared to address unexpected problems or emergencies. They are trained to recognize such situations and effectively correct them.

What you need to know

Patients selecting a dental professional for a specialty-related procedure like wisdom teeth removal, dental implants, root canals or orthodontics should ask the following questions:

1. Are you a trained [oral and maxillofacial surgeon, periodontist, orthodontist, etc]? If not, what training have you had in performing this procedure?
2. How many procedures have you performed in the last six months?
3. What are the possible complications of this procedure?
4. If there are complications, how do you address them?
5. Will anesthesia be used for this procedure? If yes, who will administer the anesthetic? Who will monitor me during the procedure? What are your emergency capabilities and procedures?
6. What is your rate of success for this procedure?

Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons

Following dental school, oral and maxillofacial surgeons surgically train for a minimum of four years in a hospital-based residency program. Many OMSs complete a six-year residency and hold dual degrees in dentistry and medicine. In addition, oral and maxillofacial surgeons may go on to complete a fellowship in a specialty area such as oral, head and neck cancer. All oral and maxillofacial surgeons are trained and skilled in diagnosing and surgically treating a number of conditions, including the removal of third molars and other diseased teeth, dental implant surgery, diagnosis and treatment of oral, head and neck cancer, corrective jaw surgery, temporomandibular jaw surgery, and surgical treatments for obstructive sleep apnea, among others.