

Health & Safety in Dental Practice

Study Guide for Dental Nurses

NEBDN-aligned revision and refresher resource

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Introduction

Health and safety in dental practice is fundamental to protecting patients, staff, and visitors from avoidable harm. Dental environments present a range of potential hazards, including exposure to chemicals, sharps, radiation, biological agents, and manual handling risks.

Dental nurses play a central role in maintaining a safe working environment. Through adherence to health and safety legislation, practice policies, and safe working procedures, dental nurses contribute directly to patient safety, staff wellbeing, and regulatory compliance.

Legal Framework for Health and Safety

Health and safety in dental practice is governed by legislation designed to reduce workplace risks and protect individuals from harm. Dental practices are required to comply with these legal duties and demonstrate safe systems of work.

Key legislation and regulatory oversight include:

- Health and Safety at Work Act
- Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) regulations
- Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (RIDDOR)
- Ionising Radiation regulations
- Oversight by the Health and Safety Executive

Dental nurses must understand how these legal requirements apply in daily practice, even though ultimate responsibility rests with the employer.

Risk Assessment and Risk Management

Risk assessment is the process of identifying hazards, assessing who may be harmed, and implementing measures to reduce risk. It is a continuous process that must be reviewed regularly.

Common hazards in dental practice include:

- Sharps and needlestick injuries
- Exposure to chemicals and disinfectants
- Manual handling of equipment or patients
- Slips, trips, and falls
- Fire hazards

Dental nurses support risk management by following control measures, reporting hazards, and working in accordance with practice protocols.

Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH)

Dental practices use substances that may be hazardous if improperly handled. COSHH regulations require practices to assess and control risks associated with these substances.

Substances commonly covered by COSHH include:

- Disinfectants and cleaning agents
- Dental materials and chemicals
- Sterilising solutions
- Radiographic processing chemicals

Dental nurses must:

- Follow COSHH assessments
- Use personal protective equipment where required
- Store substances correctly
- Report spills or exposure incidents promptly

Failure to follow COSHH procedures may result in injury, illness, or regulatory action.

Infection Prevention and Environmental Safety

Maintaining a safe clinical environment reduces the risk of infection transmission and injury.

Key aspects include:

- Clean and clutter-free work areas
- Safe handling and disposal of clinical waste
- Correct use of sharps containers
- Regular cleaning and decontamination of surfaces

Dental nurses are responsible for maintaining high standards of environmental safety throughout the working day.

Sharps Safety

Sharps injuries present a significant risk in dental practice due to potential exposure to blood-borne viruses.

Sharps include:

- Needles
- Scalpels
- Orthodontic wires

Safe sharps practice includes:

- Avoiding re-sheathing needles
- Using approved sharps containers
- Disposing of sharps immediately after use
- Reporting sharps injuries according to practice policy

Prompt reporting allows appropriate medical follow-up and reduces long-term risk.

Manual Handling

Manual handling refers to the lifting, moving, or supporting of loads. In dental practice, this may include equipment, stock, or assisting patients.

Poor manual handling can result in:

- Musculoskeletal injuries
- Chronic back or joint problems

Dental nurses should:

- Use correct lifting techniques
- Avoid lifting heavy loads alone
- Use equipment or seek assistance where needed
- Follow manual handling training guidance

Fire Safety

Fire safety is an essential component of health and safety management. Dental practices must have procedures in place to prevent fires and respond effectively if one occurs.

Dental nurses should be aware of:

- Fire evacuation procedures

- Location of fire exits
- Fire alarm systems
- Assembly points

Fire drills and training ensure staff can respond calmly and safely in an emergency.

Radiation Safety

Dental practices using X-rays must comply with radiation safety regulations to protect patients and staff.

Dental nurses should understand:

- The importance of controlled areas
- Safe working distances
- Use of protective equipment where appropriate
- Following local rules and protocols

Radiation exposure should be kept as low as reasonably practicable.

Accident Reporting and RIDDOR

Accidents, incidents, and near misses must be recorded and, where necessary, reported under RIDDOR.

Dental nurses should:

- Report accidents promptly
- Complete incident documentation accurately
- Inform appropriate senior staff

Accurate reporting supports learning and helps prevent future incidents.

The Role of the Dental Nurse in Health and Safety

The dental nurse must:

- Follow health and safety policies
- Use PPE appropriately
- Report hazards, accidents, and near misses

- Maintain a tidy and safe working environment
- Participate in training and updates

The dental nurse must not:

- Ignore unsafe practices
- Use equipment incorrectly
- Bypass safety procedures
- Undertake tasks without appropriate training

Professional vigilance is essential to maintaining safety standards.

Summary

Health and safety in dental practice is a shared responsibility that underpins safe patient care and staff wellbeing. Dental nurses play a vital role in identifying risks, following safe systems of work, and responding appropriately to incidents.

A thorough understanding of health and safety principles, combined with professional responsibility and awareness, enables dental nurses to contribute to a safe, compliant, and effective dental practice.