

HOW TO CHOOSE A DENTIST THE SMART WAY

Little known questions every patient should ask before choosing a dentist.

Any time you are choosing a healthcare provider, you always wonder where you can find out the things that other people already know. It is easier to decide on a dentist when you know what to look for and exactly what to ask. Then you can decide by comparing your wants and desires with the services that will be provided by the various choices you have for a dentist.

Here are some key questions you can ask over the phone before you make an appointment. These five questions will help you find the right dental care provider for you:

1. What continuing education has the dentist taken in the last 12 months? New developments in dentistry are emerging every day. Leading edge technologies, new ways to diagnose, and better treatments are being discovered, tested, and confirmed regularly. The dentist of choice should be keeping up with all of the newest developments. You will want to have a dentist who knows all of the potential treatments for every condition. State requirements, however, are minimal to maintain a license to practice dentistry. For instance, in Texas a dentist is only required to have 12 hours of continuing education each year. Is the dentist just doing the minimum required to stay in practice or striving to stay educated so you will stay healthy? If the appointment coordinator on the phone can't tell you what courses have been taken lately, it is likely that there haven't been very many!

2. How long will it take to perform my initial examination? Be sure that you are going to a dentist who will provide a thorough exam so that you and the dentist will be totally aware of your entire oral health condition. Check to see if the dentist will take the time with you to discuss your condition and treatment options. A

thorough dentist will set aside at least an hour or more to do a complete exam and consultation.

3. What is included in my initial exam?

Some dentists just take a cursory glance around and ask what hurts. This may be a "look-see" to detect the obvious, but it isn't an effective exam that will protect you and your long-term health.

There are four things a thorough exam should include:

(a) A check of all your teeth for decay including the current condition of any existing restorations. Notes should be made on your chart of all existing restorations and the condition of all of your other teeth. You should be given the option of having a full series of X-Rays rather than just four "bite-wings" if the total condition of your dental health is being evaluated thoroughly.

(b) A complete and thorough check of the health of your gums with a periodontal probe. This instrument is inserted between each tooth and your gums to measure bone depth. Six points on every tooth should be checked and the findings charted.

(c) A check of your bite should be made to determine how your teeth come together. The check should determine if there is balance, excessive wear, or jaw pain.

(d) There should be an oral cancer exam to check for any signs of oral cancer. If the prospective dentist is up-to-date, the office will have on hand the latest technology called ViziLite® or VELscope®. An oral cancer exam using either of these technologies enables the dentist to immediately see if there are any abnormal tissue cells in the mouth. You should have an oral cancer exam at least annually. Ask in advance if the office has ViziLite® or

VELscope® and what their oral cancer exam protocol is.

4. Ask what will occur between the time of your arrival at the office and when the dentist starts the actual exam. This will determine if there will be time for you to talk to a treatment coordinator or to the dentist before the work begins. A dentist interested in you and your health will set time aside to listen to your concerns and expectations during your first visit.

5. Ask when the dental team went through Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) compliance training. OSHA has very clear guidelines for dental offices to follow in order to maintain the highest standard of sterilization and infection control. Every member of the dental office team is required by regulation to take compliance training at least once a year.

When you have investigated these five things, take time to do a brief mental review of the experience you have had. Recall how you have been treated on the phone. The treatment you receive from the appointment coordinator can often be an indication of how you are going to be treated in that office by other team members as well, including the dentist.

MAKE THE FIRST VISIT TO THE OFFICE A TRUE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

As you enter the office, be a detective. You may see little things that could be symptoms of more significant things going on behind the scenes. Here are some things to observe:

1. Is the reception area tidy, organized, neat, and clean? This may be an indication of how organized and clean the entire office is likely to be.

2. Are you seen on time? This will provide an indication of whether this is a

people-oriented practice or one that is just treating teeth. It may not be realistic to expect the dental practice to be right on schedule all the time, but it is realistic to expect to be told within 10 minutes of your arrival if there will be a time delay.

3. Is the restroom near the reception area neat and clean? What you find there will likely give you an idea of what you can expect in the total office in terms of organization, cleanliness, and attention to detail.

4. Are the doctor and the members of the dental team good examples of proper dental health and hygiene? Do they have attractive smiles? This is an indication of whether they believe in what they are doing. The dental team members should be good examples of the service they provide. If the optimal dental health you want for yourself is not important enough to the providers you have chosen to have it done for themselves, then there is reason to question the recommendations you might be given by those providers.

The above suggestions are just some of the things you can ask and observe in order to make the right choice of a dentist who will serve you and your needs the best. Take the time to ask the right questions so you'll have the peace of mind of knowing that you are in the best hands for what you want for the long term health of your mouth and your smile.

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Stephanie W. Reichmiller, DMD
1316 Somerville Road SE, Ste. 2
Decatur, AL 35601
256-350-5820
www.alabamaclassicssmile.com