

Pre-Dentistry Guide

What is a Dentist?

Dentists are licensed healthcare professionals who diagnose, treat, and prevent conditions affecting the oral cavity, including the teeth, gums, and surrounding structures. They perform procedures such as fillings, extractions, root canals, and preventive care, while also educating patients on oral hygiene and overall health.

Dentists earn either a Doctor of Dental Surgery (DDS) or Doctor of Dental Medicine (DMD) degree, both of which are equivalent and require four years of professional education following a bachelor's degree. The first two years of dental school focus on foundational biomedical sciences such as anatomy, physiology, and biochemistry, while the final two years emphasize clinical training and patient care.

Dentistry offers a variety of career paths, including general practice and specialized fields such as orthodontics, oral surgery, pediatric dentistry, and periodontics. Many dentists work in private practice, while others pursue careers in public health, research, or academia.

Salary and Job Outlook

The following statistics provide an overview of dentist salary and job outlook in the United States based on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Quick Facts: Dentists	
2024 Median Pay ?	\$179,210 per year \$86.16 per hour
Typical Entry-Level Education ?	Doctoral or professional degree
Work Experience in a Related Occupation ?	None
On-the-job Training ?	See How to Become One
Number of Jobs, 2024 ?	149,300
Job Outlook, 2024–34 ?	4% (As fast as average)
Employment Change, 2024–34 ?	5,900

The average annual income for dentists varies depending on specialty, experience, and practice setting. General dentists typically earn over \$150,000 per year, while specialists may earn significantly more. Dentists who own private practices often have higher earning potential.

The job outlook for dentists is projected to grow steadily due to increased awareness of oral health and demand for dental services. Additionally, there is continued need for dental professionals in underserved and rural areas.

Types of Dental Careers

Dentistry offers a variety of career paths that allow individuals to focus on different patient populations, procedures, and areas of expertise. The type of dental career a person chooses can influence their daily responsibilities, work environment, lifestyle, and earning potential.

General Dentistry	Specialized Fields	Public Health & Research	Academic & Other Careers
Provide routine oral care such as cleanings, fillings, and preventive services	Advanced areas requiring additional training	Focus on community health and prevention	Teaching and training future dentists
Diagnose and treat common dental conditions	Orthodontics (braces, alignment)	Public health dentistry	Dental school faculty
Most common career path	Oral and maxillofacial surgery	Community clinics	Research institutions
Work in private practice or group practices	Pediatric dentistry (children)	Government agencies	Industry roles
Build long-term patient relationships	Endodontics (root canals), periodontics (gum disease)	Focus on underserved populations	Administrative or leadership roles

In addition to general dentistry, many dentists choose to specialize in specific areas of practice through advanced education and residency programs. Specialties such as orthodontics, oral surgery, and pediatric dentistry require additional years of training but allow dentists to focus on more complex procedures and patient populations. Dentists may also pursue careers outside of traditional clinical practice. Opportunities exist in public health, where dentists work to improve access to care and promote oral health at a community level, as well as in research, academia, and industry. The wide range of career paths within dentistry allows individuals to choose a profession that aligns with their interests, lifestyle preferences, and long-term goals.

Education & Requirement to Become a Dentist

Step 1: Pick a Major

During undergraduate study, students may major in any discipline as long as they complete the required prerequisite coursework for dental school. However, science-based majors such as Biology or Chemistry are commonly chosen because they incorporate many of the required courses and provide a strong foundation for dental school. Each dental school establishes its own prerequisite requirements and GPA expectations. While minimum GPA requirements may be around 3.0, competitive applicants typically have GPAs of **3.5 or higher**, particularly in science coursework.

At Salisbury University, students interested in dentistry often follow a pre-dental track while majoring in Biology, Chemistry, or a related field. Salisbury's smaller class sizes allow students to build strong relationships with faculty, which can support academic success, research opportunities, and strong letters of recommendation.

Common Prerequisites	Salisbury Equivalent
General Biology w/lab	BIOL 201 and BIOL 202
General Chemistry w/lab	CHEM 121 and CHEM 122
Organic Chemistry w/lab	CHEM 221 and CHEM 222
Biochemistry	CHEM 417
Physics w/lab	PHYS 101 and PHYS 102

Additional Recommended Courses	
Microbiology	BIOL 211
Anatomy & Physiology	BIOL 215 and BIOL 216
Psychology	PSYC 101
Sociology	SOCI 101

Prerequisite requirements vary by program, so students should review individual dental school requirements.

Step 2: Gain Dental Experience

Dental schools expect applicants to gain meaningful exposure to the profession through shadowing and hands-on experiences.

Students should aim to gain experience through:

- Shadowing general and specialized dentists
- Volunteering in dental clinics or community programs
- Working as a dental assistant (if possible)
- Participating in service-based dental outreach

A unique opportunity for Salisbury University students is participation in programs such as the **Eastern Shore Mission of Mercy**, which provides free dental care to underserved populations and allows students to gain hands-on experience while serving the community.

Students are encouraged to begin gaining experience early and to maintain consistent involvement. Most competitive applicants have **100 or more hours of dental shadowing experience**.

Step 3: Standardized Exam (DAT)

Dental schools expect applicants to gain meaningful exposure to the profession through shadowing and hands-on experiences.

Students should aim to gain experience through:

- Shadowing general and specialized dentists
- Volunteering in dental clinics or community programs
- Working as a dental assistant (if possible)
- Participating in service-based dental outreach

A unique opportunity for Salisbury University students is participation in programs such as the **Eastern Shore Mission of Mercy**, which provides free dental care to underserved populations and allows students to gain hands-on experience while serving the community.

Students are encouraged to begin gaining experience early and to maintain consistent involvement. Most competitive applicants have **100 or more hours of dental shadowing experience**.

Step 4: Letters of Recommendation

The Dental Admission Test (DAT) is required for admission to all dental schools in the United States and is administered by the American Dental Association.

The DAT is a computerized exam that assesses:

- Survey of Natural Sciences (biology, general chemistry, organic chemistry)
- Perceptual Ability (spatial and visual problem solving)
- Reading Comprehension
- Quantitative Reasoning

The exam takes approximately 4.5 hours to complete and is offered year-round at testing centers.

Students typically take the DAT after completing core science courses, usually during their junior year. Preparation often requires 2–3 months of dedicated study.

Competitive applicants typically score around 21–23 on the DAT.

Step 5: Applying to Dental School

Most dental schools require 3–4 letters of recommendation. These letters help admissions committees evaluate an applicant's academic ability, professionalism, and readiness for dental school.

Many programs prefer letters from:

- Science professors
- Dentists (highly recommended)
- Academic advisors or supervisors

Students at Salisbury University are encouraged to build strong relationships with faculty through office hours, research opportunities, and class engagement. Strong connections with professors and mentors can lead to more detailed and supportive letters of recommendation.

Students should request letters well in advance and provide recommenders with supporting materials such as resumes and personal statements.

How Competitive is Dental School

Most dental schools use the centralized application system **AADSAS**, which allows students to apply to multiple programs through a single application.

Applicants must submit:

- Official transcripts
- DAT scores
- Letters of recommendation
- Personal statement
- Documentation of shadowing and experiences

The application cycle typically opens in early summer (June), and many schools use **rolling admissions**, meaning applications are reviewed as they are received.

Applying early in the cycle can significantly improve an applicant's chances of receiving an interview.

Students are encouraged to begin preparing application materials early, including tracking experiences and drafting their personal statement. Salisbury University students can utilize advising resources and campus support services to strengthen their applications.

Additionally, some applicants choose to take a gap year to strengthen their application through additional experience, improved DAT scores, or further academic coursework.

Potential Barriers to Admission

In addition to academic and experiential requirements, there are several factors that may impact a student's ability to gain admission to dental school and successfully complete the program.

Academic Performance

In addition to academic and experiential requirements, there are several factors that may impact a student's ability to gain admission to dental school and successfully complete the program.

DAT Scores

Dental schools place a strong emphasis on academic performance, particularly in science coursework. A low GPA can significantly limit admission opportunities. While improvement over time can strengthen an application, consistent academic success is important to demonstrate readiness for the rigor of dental school.

Limited Dental Experience

A lack of shadowing or hands-on dental experience can be a major barrier. Dental schools expect applicants to demonstrate a clear understanding of the profession through direct exposure. Students who do not gain enough experience may struggle to show commitment to the field.

Manual Dexterity Skills

A lack of shadowing or hands-on dental experience can be a major barrier. Dental schools expect applicants to demonstrate a clear understanding of the profession through direct exposure. Students who do not gain enough experience may struggle to show commitment to the field.

Financial Cost

Dental school can be expensive, often resulting in significant student loan debt. Students must consider tuition, application costs, and living expenses when planning for this career path.

Time Commitment

Dental school can be expensive, often resulting in significant student loan debt. Students must consider tuition, application costs, and living expenses when planning for this career path.

Application Timing and Preparation

Applying late in the application cycle or submitting incomplete or unpolished materials can negatively impact admission chances. Because many dental schools use rolling admissions, early and well-prepared applications are essential.

Students should be aware of these potential challenges early and take proactive steps to strengthen their academic performance, gain experience, and prepare thoroughly for the application process.

Dental Schools Nearby and Their Requirements

Students should be aware of these potential challenges early and take proactive steps to strengthen their academic performance, gain experience, and prepare thoroughly for the application process.

Dental School	Location	Degree	Avg GPA	Avg DAT	Notable Requirements
University of Maryland School of Dentistry	Baltimore, MD	DDS	~3.6	~21	Strong clinical focus, preference for MD residents
University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine	Philadelphia, PA	DMD	~3.7	~22	Highly competitive, strong research emphasis
Temple University Kornberg School of Dentistry	Philadelphia, PA	DMD	~3.5	~20–21	Emphasis on clinical experience and community service
Howard University College of Dentistry	Washington, DC	DDS	~3.4	~19–20	Focus on serving underserved communities
Virginia Commonwealth University School of Dentistry	Richmond, VA	DDS	~3.6	~21	Strong clinical training, holistic review

While GPA and DAT scores are important factors in the admissions process, dental schools evaluate applicants holistically. This means they also consider dental shadowing experience, extracurricular involvement, leadership, community service, and personal characteristics such as communication skills and professionalism. Additionally, each dental school has its own mission and focus, such as serving underserved populations or emphasizing research and clinical training. Students are encouraged to research each program individually to ensure they meet all requirements and align with the school’s values and goals.

Student Resources

Below is a list of resources for students to explore when learning more about dentistry, the application process, and career pathways:

- American Dental Education Association
<https://www.adea.org/>
Provides comprehensive information on dental school admissions, prerequisite coursework, application timelines, and career planning resources.
- American Dental Association
<https://www.ada.org/>
Offers information on the dental profession, specialties, licensure, and current issues in oral healthcare.
- AADSAS
<https://www.adea.org/aadsas/>
The centralized application system used by most dental schools, where students submit applications, transcripts, DAT scores, and supporting materials.
- Salisbury University Health Professions Advising Program
<https://www.salisbury.edu/academic-offices/advising-center/hpap/>
Provides advising, application support, and guidance specifically for Salisbury University students pursuing careers in dentistry and other health professions.
- Student Doctor Network
<https://www.studentdoctor.net/>
An online platform where students can access advice, application tips, and experiences shared by current dental students and applicants