Preparing for Temporary Dental Office Closures During Coronavirus

The coronavirus pandemic is changing the way many dental practices operate.

On March 16, the American Dental Association (ADA) recommended dentists postpone elective procedures. That's led practices to reduce hours and make other changes.

In this guide, we provide sample scripts, emails, voicemail messages and more to help you communicate the changes to your patients, while reassuring them that you and your team remain committed to providing excellent dental care.

(800) 381-3638

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Communicating with your Team

It's important to let your team know what's happening and how your practice will continue to serve your patients. Here are some ways that practices are communicating:

* Conference calls
* Emails with important information
* Internal website landing page with important information. These should require an employee log-in so the information remains confidential.
* Text message groups directing employees where to find the latest information

Guidance on Employee Relations

This is a fluid situation and your team members understand that you may not have all the answers. It's important to project calm and steady leadership, and to reassure your team that everyone is working hard to figure out the best way to move forward.

Your team may have questions about wages, sick leave, vacation time, and expanded family leave and disability benefits.

They may also ask about working from home for things like calling patients and ordering supplies.

Check your state's dental association website for guidance. Many offer answers to frequently-asked questions or have links to resources that answer common employment law questions.

Establishing Emergency Care Protocols

That ADA's website said, "In order for dentistry to do its part to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, the ADA recommends dentists nationwide postpone elective procedures. Concentrating on emergency dental care will allow us to care for our emergency patients and alleviate the burden that dental emergencies would place on hospital emergency departments."

Chances are you already have a protocol in place for providing emergency dental care. If not, check with your dental association for guidance. The ADA recommends screening for dental emergencies using teledentistry or other remote modalities to minimize the risk of virus transmission. For more guidance, visit ADA.org/virus.

Your patients may have a different idea of what constitutes an emergency than you. For example, is it an emergency if a crown falls off? How about if the tooth cracked, but there is no pain?

Take the time to create a list of circumstances with your team and decide how you want to handle each one. You may want to look at your appointments for the past month and see how many were for urgent dental care. That could help you determine how frequently you should plan to be open to help your patients receive the dental care they need.

Here are some things to consider:

- How can emergency dental patients communicate their need for an appointment?
- Who will respond to the patient?
- Who is needed to help treat the patient?
- Do you want to plan to be open for a few hours a few times a week, or open on a case-by-case basis?
- Do you need to establish new health protocols such as checking the temperature of patients and team members, requiring long-sleeved gowns, and wiping down doorknobs and handles after every use?

Communicating with Your Patients

Canceling & Rescheduling Appointments

It's important to call your scheduled patients to let them know about the change. This is a great chance to showcase your team's professionalism and compassion. The goal is to cancel the current appointment and reschedule for several weeks out.

Here is a sample script to use:

"Hi, Mrs. Jones. This is _____ from _____ . We've been closely following all of the recent health developments and are calling you today because the American Dental Association recommended we focus on providing emergency dental care right now.

"Our team members are healthy and we look forward to taking care of you. Could we reschedule you for May? We want to make sure we reserve a spot for you now. We can adjust that as we get closer, if needed."

If your patients have questions about whether it's safe to come in to your practice, here is some phrasing you can use.

"It's important to take care of your oral health because your mouth is the gateway to your body, and your oral health has a direct impact on overall health. And I want to tell you that it's safe to come in. It's safe to get the treatment that you need. We're healthcare providers and I can promise you that we always follow all of the CDC's safety protocols. Just think about the last time you were here. We always wear masks and gloves and change our protective outerwear in between every patient. Everything is sterilized and we've increased our already-high standards so we're hyper-vigilant right now."

Updating Your Voicemail Message

If your office is closed, assign somebody who can check voicemails, return calls, and delete old messages. This will keep your patients from receiving a message that your voicemail box is full.

During this time, it's important to have an updated voicemail message that describes how patients can schedule an appointment for emergency dental care.

For example, your updated voicemail message may say:

"Thank you for calling [Office Name]. We are currently scheduling new patients and non-urgent dental appointments for May. If you are a current patient of record and are experiencing a dental emergency, please leave your name, number and the nature of your emergency, and we will return your call within the hour."

Updating Your Dental Practice Website

This is a great opportunity to update your welcome message on your website to include reassuring phrasing such as:

Our friendly team has been providing high-quality dentistry in a compassionate, comfortable and safe environment for more than ___ years. We are currently scheduling new patients and non-urgent dental care for May. Please call us at [OFFICE PHONE NUMBER] so we can reserve a time to help you.

We are still open and providing emergency dental care for current patients of record. Please call [PHONE NUMBER] so we can schedule a time.

Our patients' safety and well-being are our top priority. We have elevated our high standards even further by asking all patients to use hand sanitizer when they enter our office, have their temperature taken, and provide information regarding recent travel, cold symptoms, and exposure to anyone with COVID-19.

Door Signage

Some medical and dental practices have added a sign to their front door asking patients to text or call them when they arrive for their appointment. It's important to make sure the font is large enough for people to see it and know that you are open.

Possible phrasing may include:

We are open by appointment for emergency dental care.
If you have an appointment, welcome!

Please call [PHONE NUMBER] to let us know that you have arrived and we will bring you directly into a private treatment room.

Thank you!

Updating Office Hours

If you are still answering the phone, then it may not be necessary to update your office hours online because your receptionist can tell the caller when the practice is seeing patients.

If you are reducing your days or hours for phone coverage, then you'll need to update every place that lists your hours, including your website, Google map listing, Yelp, and Facebook.

You may want to set a calendar reminder for yourself in a few weeks. Hopefully, this change will be of short duration and you'll be able to return to your normal operating hours soon.

Email to Current Patients

Your patients are going to still have toothaches, broken crowns, abscesses and other dental emergencies during this time.

If you have implemented a teledentistry service so you can screen for dental emergencies, you'll want to let them know about that.

Here is a template you can use:

Hi [Patient First Name],

Your health and well-being is our top priority. We've been closely following all of the recent health developments. The American Dental Association just recommended postponing non-urgent dental care until May.

Our team is healthy and we're here to help you should you have a dental emergency, just like always.

A dental emergency may include:
• [LIST SERVICE]
• [LIST SERVICE]
• [LIST SERVICE]

We now offer teledentistry so we can assess your condition and determine whether you need to come into the office for emergency dental treatment. Please visit [LINK] to schedule your online appointment.

You may also call our practice at [PHONE NUMBER] should you require dental treatment that cannot be postponed.

We have built our reputation by providing high-quality dental care in a compassionate, comfortable and safe environment and look forward to helping you.

Sincerely,
Dr. ____ and team

About Patient Prism

Patient Prism provides call tracking and call coaching software designed exclusively for dental practices to improve new patient call conversions and increase dental practice revenue. It provides business analytics, coaching tips, and actionable data to improve staff performance and recapture callers who initially did not book an appointment. In addition, it offers Patient Prism Academy, a learning management system with more than 900 training videos and interviews with dental industry leaders. This gives dental practices a way to consistently provide team members with access to the industry's most respected leaders so they can stay up-to-date on the latest trends and best practices.

Additional Resourcees

It's more important than ever to make sure your team has the tools and training to effectively communicate with patients.

Patient Prism can help. We analyze your new patient calls, identify the people who don't schedule, and send you an alert detailing what you can say to win them back – all within 30 minutes.

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Coronavirus Concerns and your Dental Patients

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