



American Heart Association®

Healthy Smiles, Healthy Hearts™

Ready, Set, Go! Quick Guide

Blood Pressure Screening and Referral Process in the Dental Setting



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with the American Heart Association's
Healthy Smiles, Healthy Hearts Initiative.

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The Opportunity in the Dental Chair

About 120 million U.S. adults, nearly half of the population, have hypertension, and approximately 78% of those individuals are reported to have uncontrolled hypertension¹. Over 40% of adults aged 30 and older have been estimated to experience gum disease², which contributes to systemic inflammation and can raise cardiovascular risk. One study reported that untreated oral infections can triple the risk of heart disease. With an estimated 29 million people visiting a dental professional but not a medical professional each year³, dental professionals are uniquely positioned to support early detection and overall health care.

About the American Heart Association's Healthy Smiles, Healthy Hearts Initiative

The American Heart Association's Healthy Smiles, Healthy Hearts™ initiative, in collaboration with Delta Dental, equips dental professionals to identify early signs of cardiovascular risk, normalize blood pressure screening as part of routine dental care, give patient education to reinforce the oral and cardiovascular health connection, and provide referrals to primary care when needed.

This document serves as a **quick-start guide** to implementing blood pressure screening and referral protocols in dental settings. For a more comprehensive implementation guide, along with additional professional and patient-facing resources, visit: heart.org/HealthySmiles

Accurate Blood Pressure Screening

Poor positioning can lead to inaccurate blood pressure readings, potentially resulting in missed or misinterpreted health risks. To ensure **accurate and consistent blood pressure measurements**, dental professionals should follow these best practices aligned with the American Heart Association and the American College of Cardiology 2025 Blood Pressure Guideline:

Validated Equipment

A validated blood pressure device has undergone independent clinical testing and meets established accuracy standards, meaning it reliably provides precise readings across diverse populations. To find a validated blood pressure device, visit trusted lists such as the [American Medical Association's Blood Pressure Validated Device Listing \(VDL™\)](#).

Make sure to use a **validated upper-arm blood pressure monitor** with the correct **cuff size** (small, standard, large, or XL) to ensure accuracy. **Wrist devices are not preferred** but sometimes needed. If an upper-arm cuff does not fit the patient due to arm size, use a validated wrist cuff.



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Blood Pressure Screening in the Dental Setting

Before the Screening

- ☐ The patient should avoid **smoking, caffeinated beverages, alcohol, and physical activity** for at least **30 minutes** prior to the reading.
- ☐ The patient should **empty their bladder**.
- ☐ The patient should sit **quietly for more than 5 minutes**, without talking or distractions.

During the Screening

- ☐ The patient should be seated **upright**, with their **back fully supported**.
- ☐ The patient's **feet should be flat on the floor**, with **legs uncrossed**. Feet must not be dangling or partially supported.
- ☐ The **arm being measured** should rest at **heart level** on a **stable surface**.
- ☐ The blood pressure cuff should be placed **directly on bare skin**, not over clothing.
- ☐ The patient should remain **still and silent** throughout the reading.
- ☐ The patient should not be using their phone.
- ☐ Take **at least two blood pressure readings**, spaced **one minute apart**.

Dental Chair Considerations and Limitations

To perform a blood pressure screening with the patient on the dental chair, and in alignment with the American Heart Association and the American College of Cardiology 2025 Blood Pressure Guideline, **the dental chair should be able to:**

- ☐ **Be positioned at a 90-degree angle**, allowing the **patient to sit upright** as if on a bench.
- ☐ Ensure **the knees are bent at a right angle** and **the feet are flat and supported** to maintain correct posture.
- ☐ If the **feet are hanging** or **not fully touching the floor**, provide a **footrest or stool** to ensure they are **supported**.
- ☐ If none of the above are feasible, have the patient sit on a regular chair to perform the blood pressure screening.



Interpreting Readings & Action Steps

Disclaimer: Thresholds are intended as general guidance; the treating dental professional should use clinical judgment, patient history, and context to determine the most appropriate course of action.

BLOOD PRESSURE CATEGORY	SYSTOLIC mm Hg (upper number)		DIASTOLIC mm Hg (lower number)
NORMAL	LESS THAN 120	and	LESS THAN 80
ELEVATED	120 - 129	and	LESS THAN 80
STAGE 1 HYPERTENSION (HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE)	130 -139	or	80 - 89
STAGE 2 HYPERTENSION (HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE)	140 OR HIGHER	or	90 OR HIGHER
SEVERE HYPERTENSION (if you don't have symptoms*, call your healthcare professional)	HIGHER THAN 180	and/or	HIGHER THAN 120
HYPERTENSIVE EMERGENCY (if you have any of these symptoms*, call 911)	HIGHER THAN 180	and/or	HIGHER THAN 120

*Symptoms include chest pain, shortness of breath, back pain, numbness, weakness, change in vision or difficulty speaking



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Normal Blood Pressure Readings of lower than 120/80 mm Hg

Education: Educate patients on heart-healthy habits, which may include maintaining a healthy diet, engaging in regular physical activity, avoiding tobacco, getting adequate sleep, maintaining a healthy weight, or managing stress. Encourage the patient to connect with their primary care professional if they have not seen them in the last year.

Script: “Good news! Your blood pressure is in the normal range. We check blood pressure here because oral health and heart health are connected, and high blood pressure often has no symptoms. Can we agree to begin or keep up those heart-healthy habits, like eating well, staying active, and managing stress? And if you haven’t seen your primary care professional in the last year, now’s a great time.”



Elevated Blood Pressure Readings of 120-129/<80 mm Hg

Education: Let the patient know their blood pressure is slightly higher than normal and that this is a good time to make healthy lifestyle choices. Encourage them to stay proactive and connect with their primary care professional for follow-up and support, if they have not seen their primary care professional in the last year. Educate patients on heart-healthy habits, which may include maintaining a healthy diet, engaging in regular physical activity, avoiding tobacco, getting adequate sleep, maintaining a healthy weight, or managing stress.

Script: “Your blood pressure is slightly elevated today, not in the hypertension range yet, but it’s a sign we want to keep an eye on. We check here because oral and heart health are closely connected. Have you seen a reading like this before? If not, it’s worth checking in with your primary care professional if you haven’t seen them in the last year. Keep up (or begin) heart-healthy habits in the meantime like eating well, staying active and managing stress. We’ll note this in your chart.”





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Stage 1 Blood Pressure Readings of 130-139/80-89 mm Hg

Education: If a patient's blood pressure remains high after a second reading, the dental team may inquire whether the patient has previously been diagnosed with hypertension by a medical professional. If so, the team may review the patient's medical history or intake form to note any prescribed antihypertensive medications and, when appropriate, confirm whether the patient takes their medication as directed. If a patient reports being prescribed medication but did not take it that day, the dental team can encourage consistent medication use and recommend follow-up with their primary care professional.

Let your patient know their blood pressure was in the Stage 1 hypertension range today. Educate patients on heart-healthy habits, which may include maintaining a healthy diet, engaging in regular physical activity, avoiding tobacco, getting adequate sleep, maintaining a healthy weight, or managing stress.

Dental Treatment: You can proceed with dental treatment.



Script: "Your blood pressure today falls in the Stage 1 hypertension range. Have you seen numbers like this before? It doesn't require emergency care, but it does increase heart risk if left unmanaged. We check blood pressure here because oral and heart health are connected. Let's agree it's time to follow up with your primary care professional soon. In the meantime, keep focusing on habits like movement, healthy eating, and managing stress. We'll note this in your chart."

Stage 2 Blood Pressure Readings of $\geq 140/90$ mm Hg

Education: If a patient's blood pressure remains high after a second reading, the dental team may inquire whether the patient has previously been diagnosed with hypertension by a medical professional. If so, the team may review the patient's medical history or intake form to note any prescribed antihypertensive medications and, when appropriate, confirm whether the patient takes their medication as directed. If a patient reports being prescribed medication but did not take it that day, the dental team can encourage consistent medication use and recommend follow-up with their primary care professional.

Let your patient know their blood pressure was in the Stage 2 hypertension range today. Reassure them that you're part of their health care team and that this reading gives them a chance to take action. Encourage them to follow up with their primary care professional and educate patients on heart-healthy habits, which may include maintaining a healthy diet, engaging in regular physical activity, avoiding tobacco, getting adequate sleep, maintaining a healthy weight, or managing stress.



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Dental Treatment:

If 140 – 159 mm Hg systolic or 90-99 mm Hg diastolic, you can proceed with treatment and advise the patient to follow up with their primary care professional. Provide referral if needed.

If 160 – 180 mm Hg systolic or 100-109 mm Hg diastolic:

- **Elective dental treatment:** Defer elective care and seek consultation with a primary care professional. Advise the patient to also follow up with their primary care professional.
- **Emergency dental treatment:** May proceed if dental symptoms are contributing to hypertension; monitor every 10–15 minutes; consider anxiety- reduction techniques. Seek consultation with a primary care professionals. advise the patient to follow up with their primary care professional. Provide referral if needed.

If 109 – 120 mm Hg diastolic:

- **Elective dental treatment:** Defer elective care and seek consultation with a primary care professional.
- **Emergency dental treatment:** Seek consultation with a primary care professionals.



Elective Dental Treatment Script: “Your blood pressure today is in the very high range, especially your bottom number. This puts extra stress on your heart and makes routine dental care unsafe right now. Have you been diagnosed with hypertension or missed any medications today? Let’s agree to pause elective care and connect you with your primary care professional. We’ll document this and provide a referral to support follow-up.”

Emergency Treatment Script: “Your blood pressure is high so we must consult with a medical professional before continuing. Have you taken your blood pressure medication today? Your health is our priority right now, so we’ll document today’s reading and help you contact your professional. Let’s work together to keep you safe and supported.”



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Severe Hypertension or Hypertensive Emergency Blood Pressure Readings of > 180/>120 mm Hg

If the second reading remains > 180/>120 mm Hg, check for these symptoms:

- Chest pain
- Shortness of breath
- Back pain
- Numbness
- Weakness
- Change in vision
- Difficulty speaking

Severe Hypertension- Without Symptoms

If the patient has no symptoms, but the reading remains > 180/>120 mm Hg, this may represent severe hypertension, which still warrants referral to their primary care professional for evaluation and management. Educate patients on heart-healthy habits, which may include maintaining a healthy diet, engaging in regular physical activity, avoiding tobacco, getting adequate sleep, maintaining a healthy weight, or managing stress.

Dental Treatment:

- **Elective dental treatment:** Defer elective care and seek consultation with a primary care professional.
- **Emergency dental treatment:** Seek consultation with a primary care professional.

Hypertensive Emergency - With Symptoms

If any of the above symptoms are present, call 911 immediately. This is a medical emergency requiring urgent evaluation. Find more information on when to call 911 here: [When To Call 911 About High Blood Pressure | American Heart Association](#)

Dental Treatment: Defer care. Call 911.



Elective Dental Treatment Script: “Your blood pressure remains very high, but since you’re not experiencing symptoms like chest pain or vision changes, it’s not an emergency, yet it’s still serious. We check blood pressure here because your oral and heart health are connected. Have you had a reading like this before? Let’s agree to defer treatment today and get you connected with your primary professional right away. We’ll document this and provide a referral if needed.”

Emergency Dental Treatment Script: “Your blood pressure is high so we must consult with a medical professional before continuing with the emergency treatment. Have you taken your blood pressure medication today? Your health is our priority right now, so we’ll document today’s reading and help you contact your professional. Let’s work together to keep you safe and supported.”



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Referral Networks

Establishing referral networks and clear communication pathways between dental professionals and primary care professionals supports follow-up for patients. Strengthening these connections helps ensure patients with high blood pressure readings receive appropriate assessment from a primary care team.

Identify Local Primary Care Partners

Start by creating a list of nearby primary care offices or clinics that your patients frequently visit or are covered under. Consider including Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) or community clinics.

Establish a Point of Contact

For your referral process, designate a specific contact person (e.g., dental assistant, dental administration, or referral coordinator) to streamline communication and ensure clarity.

Select a Clear Referral Method

Choose a consistent method for referral—printed form, fax, patient portal message, or a verbal patient handoff—and ensure both teams understand and can support that method.

Standardize Referral Information

Include the patient's blood pressure reading, date of dental screening, and any clinical notes. Consider using templates to reduce variability.

Educate the Patient at the Point of Referral

Clearly explain why the referral is being made and what the patient can expect next.

Document the Referral in the Record

Include date, method, and reason for referral in the patient's chart. If a referral was declined or delayed, document that as well.



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Educational Resources

For Dental Teams

- [Healthy Smiles Healthy Hearts Professional Education Resources](#)
- [Blood Pressure Measurement Skills Assessment](#)
- [When to Call 911 About High Blood Pressure](#)
- [Connection of Oral and Heart Health](#)
- [Healthy Smiles Healthy Hearts Initiative](#)
- [New AHA/ACC High Blood Pressure Guideline: Top 10 Things to Know](#)
- [Collaborative Communication Strategies: Partner with Patients](#)
- [Professional at Heart – Podcasts](#)
- [Quick Practice Assessment Tool](#)
- [Quick Start Guide to Partner with Patients](#)
- [Target: BP – Measure Accurately](#)
- [Validated Devices for Blood Pressure Screening](#)

For Patients

- [When to Call 911 About High Blood Pressure](#)
- [Connection of Oral and Heart Health](#)
- [High Blood Pressure](#)
- [How to Eat Better](#)
- [How to Get Healthy Sleep](#)
- [How to Manage Blood Sugar](#)
- [How to Quit Tobacco](#)
- [Life's Essential 8](#)
- [What Can I Do to Improve My High Blood Pressure](#)



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1. Million Hearts®. Estimated hypertension prevalence, treatment, and control among U.S. adults. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services; May 12, 2023. Accessed October 15, 2025. <https://millionhearts.hhs.gov/data-reports/hypertension-prevalence.html>.
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Gum Disease Facts. Oral Health. National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion; May 15, 2024. <https://www.cdc.gov/oral-health/data-research/facts-stats/fast-facts-gum-disease.html>. Accessed August 05, 2025.
3. Manski R, Rohde F, Ricks T, Chalmers NI. Trends in the Number and Percentage of the Population with Any Dental or Medical Visits, 2019. Statistical Brief #544. Rockville, MD: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (US); October 2022. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK594339/>



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Join the Healthy Smiles, Healthy Hearts Recognition Program



Scan Here to Register
for the Healthy Smiles,
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Recognition Program:

Participating dental sites gain recognition as a Heart Health Participating Site, benefit from standardized care resources and implementation guides, and strengthen their commitment to whole-person care.

Dental sites that screen adult patients for blood pressure and refer to primary care professionals are eligible to participate.



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