

RESEARCH REPORT

Dental Care's New Normal:

Provider survey reveals the need to adapt and redesign

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Methodology:

The Dental Provider Return to Work Survey was developed by the DentaQuest Partnership for Oral Health Advancement in May 2020. The electronic survey was emailed to 37,208 DentaQuest providers and requested participation from dentists or dental practice managers. Survey participation was voluntary. A total of 3,925 providers participated in the survey (11% response rate), among which 2,710 providers completed the survey after determining that their positions/roles meant that they had sufficient knowledge to provide accurate answers to the questions. This research received an exempt determination from Western IRB.



Access to dental care is one of many ways in which COVID-19 has fundamentally altered and disrupted Americans' lives. In the early weeks of the pandemic, most dental practices essentially shut down by restricting services to only emergency dental care. Now, dental offices find themselves under significant stress as they seek to offer necessary care in a new, unpredictable environment.

Although [some surveys](#) have examined how dental practices are faring during COVID-19, very little information has been communicated that examines:

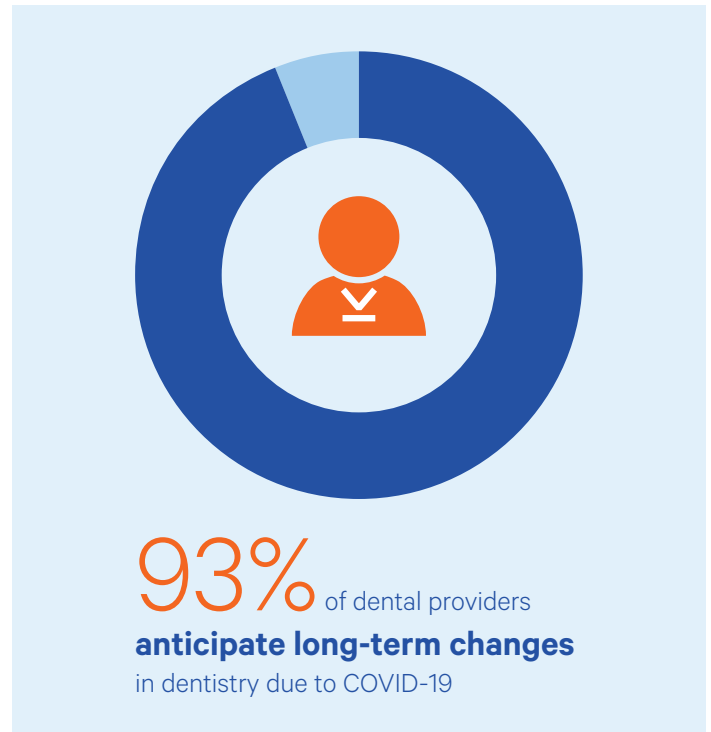
- Whether dental providers are confident they can implement [new protocols](#) to address infection control and other pandemic-related challenges; and
- How Medicaid and other safety-net dental providers are handling the challenges of this crisis. These providers are important because 1) they serve a high-risk population with significant unmet dental needs, and 2) their financial stability is vulnerable due to reimbursement rates that are historically lower for the populations they primarily serve.

To gain these and other insights, the DentaQuest Partnership for Oral Health Advancement prepared a national survey of DentaQuest participating providers and practices in May 2020. More than 3,925 dental providers from 35 states and the District of Columbia completed the survey, which explored what kind of care (if any) their dental practices were currently offering, changes in the number of patient visits, the status of their staff and finances, and their expectations for the future.

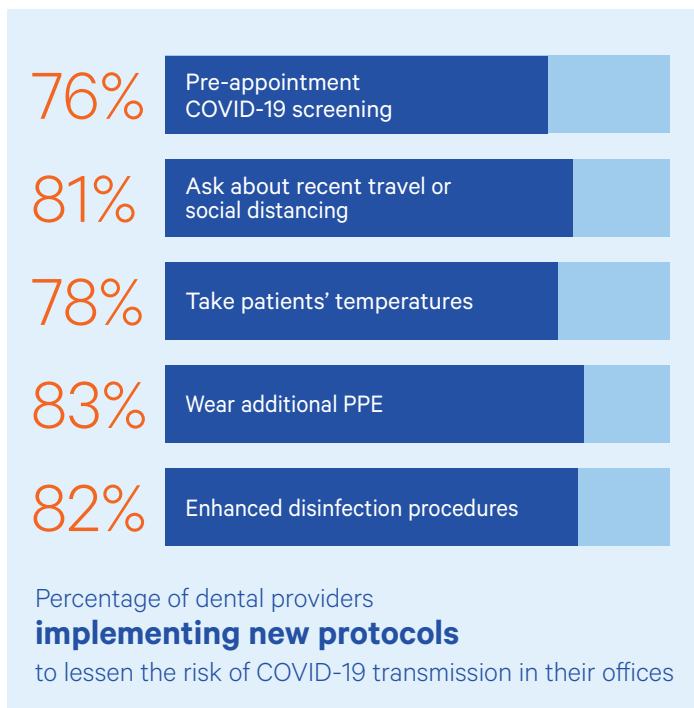
There Is No “Back To Normal”

The DentaQuest Partnership survey in May 2020 reveals a strong consensus among oral health providers that dentistry cannot fully return to HOW care was delivered before the pandemic. Of the providers who responded to the survey, 93% said they anticipated long-term changes in dentistry, including how care is provided, the use of infection control procedures, and the need to reassure patients that care at a dental office will not raise their risk of contracting COVID-19. Younger providers were particularly likely to anticipate long-term changes to the way that they practice.

Strong majorities of dental providers expected long-term changes in the number of patients seen on a typical day (72%), the way that front desk and clinical staff work (71%), and in the infection control procedures that are implemented (69%). In addition, at least half of providers anticipated long-term changes in their staff’s concern about occupational hazards (55%), in the types of procedures conducted or in how they are performed (51%), and in patients’ trust that dental care will not expose them to a higher risk of COVID-19 (50%). Nearly half (41%) of all providers responded that it will take 6 months or longer for business to return to pre-COVID-19 volumes and 16% were unsure of when they can expect to return to pre-COVID-19 volumes.



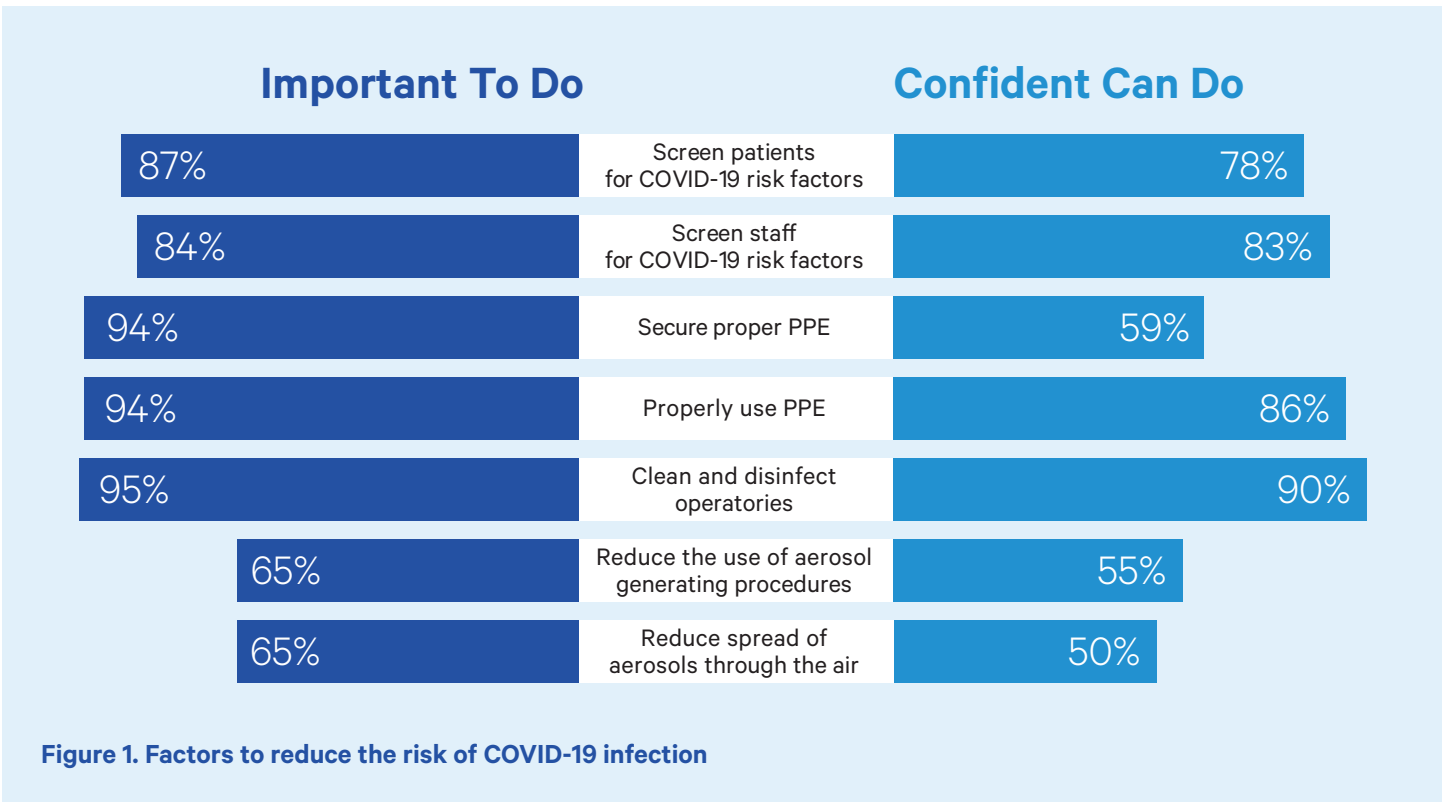
Reducing the Risk Of COVID-19



Certain dental procedures rely on drills or other instruments that can potentially aerosolize saliva and blood from the oral cavity, dispersing the COVID-19 virus into the air. As the pandemic persists, dental providers have recognized the need to implement new protocols.

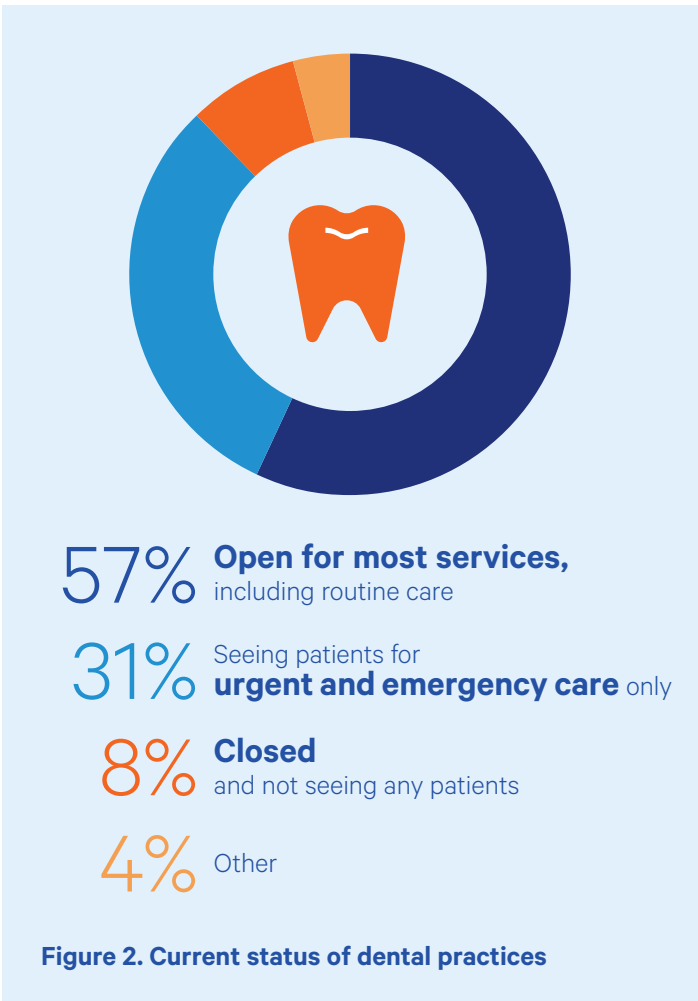
At least three-quarters of dental providers said they have adopted the following protocols to lessen the risk of COVID-19 transmission with their offices:

- 76% are calling patients prior to their appointment to screen them for COVID-19 symptoms
- 81% are asking patients about their recent travel or social distancing behaviors
- 78% are taking patients’ temperatures when they come to the office
- 83% are wearing additional personal protective equipment (PPE) when treating patients
- 82% are adopting enhanced disinfection procedures



However, there is a gap between what providers know they should do and what they feel they can do to reduce the risk of viral transmission (Figure 1). In some cases, the gap is large. For example, while 94% agreed they should secure personal protective equipment (PPE), only 59% had confidence they can acquire sufficient PPE. Similarly, just 50% of providers had confidence they can reduce the spread of aerosols through the air, even though 65% felt this is something their dental practice should do. Regression results demonstrated that male dentists and Medicaid-oriented practices (where more than 50% of the patients are enrolled in Medicaid) were particularly likely to have this confidence gap, while Hispanic providers were generally less likely to have the confidence gap.

Fifty-seven percent of respondents reported having been open during the preceding week for most services, including for routine care (Figure 2). By contrast, one-third of providers (31%) said they were seeing patients for urgent and emergency care only. It is early in the reopening, with 86% of practices reporting reopening in the last 3 weeks. Eight percent of practices that responded remained closed.

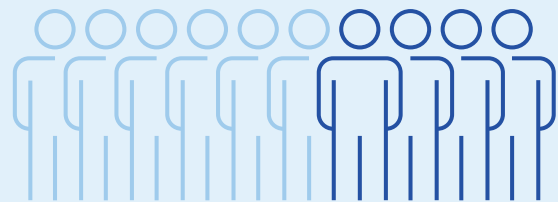


It's Time for Telehealth

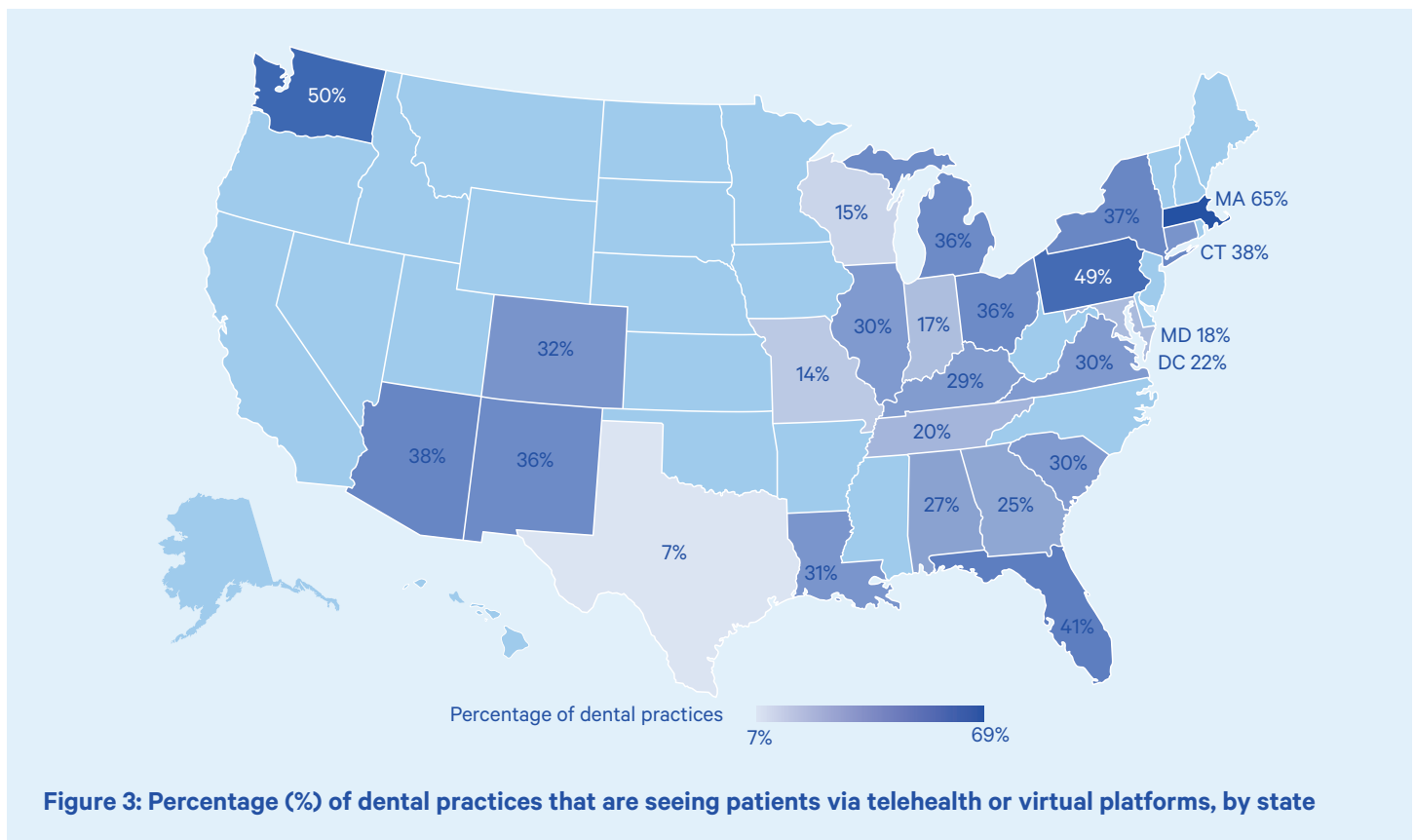
The disruptions caused by COVID-19 have significantly reduced patient visits and, therefore, could be raising dental providers' interest in using telehealth to offer at least some oral health services. Four in 10 dental providers either are currently seeing patients through telehealth platforms (27%) or soon expect to offer services through these platforms (13%) (Figure 3). Providers younger than 35 years of age, Medicaid-oriented practices, and those anticipating long-term changes in dentistry were particularly like to embrace telehealth platforms. In addition, nearly half (48%) of providers strongly or somewhat agreed that telehealth tools are more important than before for screening or evaluating patients.

Dentists' inclination to engage in telehealth is not simply a short-term interest. One-third of all providers (31%) and more than half (51%) of all providers currently using telehealth platforms cited increased use of telehealth and other forms of noncontact dentistry as one of the long-term changes they expect to make as a result of COVID-19.

Providers' growing readiness to use telehealth modalities to offer care is likely to be well received by patients. A recent survey of patients who had a telehealth encounter in Oregon found that nearly 8 in 10 patients (79%) were satisfied with their overall teledentistry experience. As the pandemic continues, many patients who are at higher risk of serious COVID-19 disease because of underlying health conditions might seek telehealth options for receiving dental care.



4 in 10 dental providers either are **currently seeing patients through telehealth platforms** or soon expect to offer services through these platforms.

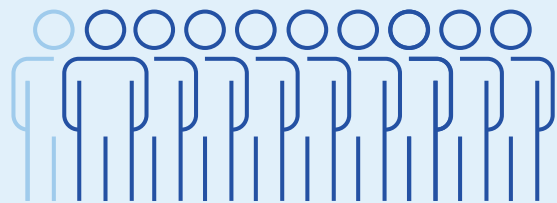




Growing Financial Stress

COVID-19 has inflicted serious disruptions on dental practices. About 90% of dental providers reported seeing their volumes of patient visits drop in the previous week compared to normal weekly volume. Among this group of providers, the average decline in patient visits was 51%. This fall in volume is affecting employment and financial solvency:

- 89% of dental providers reported that their practices received less revenue (payments and collections) in the preceding week compared to a typical pre-pandemic week. Providers age 35 and older were between 50 and 150% more likely than younger providers to report a loss in revenue.
- Of providers reporting less revenue, 86% of providers said they had incurred a 25% or greater reduction in revenue.
- Nearly 3 in 4 dental offices (72%) had laid off or furloughed staff because of the crisis.
- Roughly 1 in 6 practices (17%) reported having less than 15 days of cash on hand.



9 in 10 dental providers reported seeing their **volumes of patient visits drop**. Among this group of providers, the average **decline in patient visits was 51%**.



1 in 6 practices reported **having less than 15 days of cash on hand**.



The Path Forward

This is a time of great disruption in American lives. Although many businesses are finding ways to reopen while maintaining social distancing and exercising other precautions, dental practices face unique challenges. The DentaQuest Partnership survey in May 2020 shows that in some cases, there is a big gap between what providers know they should do and what they feel they are **capable** of doing to reduce the risk of viral transmission for themselves, their patients and staff.

A broad strategy that refocuses dentistry through pathway redesign could maintain and even improve access to care while minimizing transmission risk. This pathway redesign could include the increased use of non-aerosol generating secondary care treatments that reverse or slow the progression of active diseases. For example, secondary treatments for carious lesions may include silver diamine fluoride, temporary restorations with glass ionomers or atraumatic restorative treatments. Embracing telehealth technologies can allow providers to engage in more patient outreach, reinforce healthy behaviors, provide education and explore minimally invasive treatment options, as well as the ability to triage and direct patients to appropriate care. This pathway redesign could render dental providers less vulnerable from unpredictable patient utilization and cash flow, if, as many health experts predict, the nation experiences additional [waves of COVID-19](#).

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CareQuest Institute for Oral Health

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