

For Dentists

# Your Obligations in Dental Emergencies



All dentists are legally and professionally obligated to respond in the event of a dental emergency. What constitutes a dental emergency, as well as the dentist's responsibility in responding to one, has been revised in the Code of Ethics of the College of Dental Surgeons of BC as described below.

This new definition was created and approved by the College Board based on feedback obtained through consultations with dentists across B.C.

**A dental emergency exists if professional judgment determines that a person needs immediate attention to deal with uncontrolled bleeding, uncontrolled swelling, traumatic injury or uncontrolled severe pain. Dentists have an obligation to consult with and provide emergency dental care to members of the public, or make a reasonable attempt to provide alternative arrangements in their absence.**

The statement above relies on the dentist's professional judgment, combined with a patient assessment, as being the determinants of an appropriate response in an emergency or emergent situation. The statement reaffirms the responsibility of all dentists to ensure they, or another dentist, are available to respond to emergencies after regular business hours. The requirement continues to exist for a dentist to respond to any emergency, regardless of whether the person is a patient of record.

Where the dentist determines that it is appropriate to do so, patient problems can be handled over the phone with in-office follow-up as necessary. Other problems may need to be seen in a more timely manner or referred to a hospital emergency department when appropriate.

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## For Dentists

# How HealthLink BC can help you



**Add 8-1-1 to your after-hours protocol**

HealthLink BC is a service that assists the public and health professionals in finding and accessing appropriate healthcare resources in, or close to, their home communities. It is a resource for both patients and healthcare providers.

HealthLink BC can be a helpful referral adjunct to a dental office's after-hours emergency contact protocol. Dentists are encouraged to add the telephone answering script provided below so that patients can obtain more information about dental problems while waiting for a dentist on-call to contact them.

Dentists can direct patients to visit [www.HealthLinkBC.ca](http://www.HealthLinkBC.ca) or to call **8-1-1**:

- For dental information, including topics such as: dental abscesses, mouth and tooth injuries, wisdom teeth and knocked-out teeth
- To check symptoms with registered nurses, and to obtain advice from pharmacists and dietitians

Trained health service representatives answer all **8-1-1** calls and transfer calls as appropriate to registered nurses who provide advice and/or triage calls based on the acuity of symptoms.

Translation services are available in over 130 languages on request. For deaf and hearing-impaired assistance (TTY), call **7-1-1**.



### VOICEMAIL SCRIPT

A script is included below for adding to after-hours voicemail or answering machine messages if the dentist wants to do so. Note, however, that 8-1-1 is meant to be an adjunct and the dentist must still be available to patients during non-business hours:

*You have reached the office of Dr. NAME. The office is now closed. For after-hours dental emergencies, please call Dr. NAME at PHONE NUMBER, or the dentist on call at PHONE NUMBER. You can also visit [www.HealthLinkBC.ca](http://www.HealthLinkBC.ca) to check your symptoms online or to obtain health information. Or you can call 8-1-1 from anywhere in B.C., 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to speak with a registered nurse about your concerns.*

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## For Dentists

# Tips for Running an On-Call Group



It is every dentist's responsibility to ensure arrangements are in place to respond to dental emergencies after office hours, and dental offices have a range of options to meet this requirement.

In B.C., most dentists either list their home, cell or pager numbers on their automated phone message, or they belong to an on-call group of dentists who rotate after-hours care. In addition, dentists in some communities also have specific arrangements with their local hospital emergency rooms for responding to patients with dental emergencies.

Dentists who belong to successful on-call groups have shared tips for setting up and running a group. The dentists who provided these suggestions noted that many after-hours concerns can be dealt with over the phone by providing advice or a prescription if appropriate.

1. **There's strength in numbers.** High participation reduces the amount of time each dentist has to spend on call – ranging from a few times a year to once every few years.
2. **Designate a coordinator.** A committed person(s) is needed to run the service, monitor problems and set up a duty roster. In some communities, this is managed by the local dental component society or a dental supplier. In others, a group of dentists gets together and rotates the coordinator role every six to 12 months.
3. **Review regularly.** The dentists involved should meet at least once a year to review how things are working and deal with any problems.
4. **Establish a rotation schedule and reminder system.** A rotation schedule is essential. It should track statutory holidays and long weekends so they are shared equally between members of the group. Consider exempting the dentists who cover major holidays from having to go on-call the rest of the year. A reminder system can help each dentist remember that their on-call duty date is coming up.
5. **Establish a compensation policy for after-hours treatment.** Some dentists or call groups charge patients a flat emergency fee in addition to the standard treatment fee. Make it clear to patients ahead of time that after-hours fees may apply and that they are responsible for paying for services provided.

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- 6. Agree on how the group wants to handle specific issues.** Create a mechanism, such as regular group meetings, to discuss and resolve issues that arise. Your group may also want to establish specific protocols, such as agreeing that the first line of care should always be the patient's own dentist, followed by the dentist on-call.
- 7. Agree on a method of call screening.** This helps differentiate true emergencies from people looking for treatment after hours that could be provided during regular office hours. An answering service can transfer calls to the dentist on call. Before agreeing to see a patient in person, ask questions to determine whether medication and other treatments may be sufficient until the patient can be seen during regular office hours.
- 8. Rotate a pager or cell phone among members.** Accompany this with a log book to note the number and type of emergency calls, including patients who may be regularly abusing the service for the sake of convenience or to obtain narcotics.
- 9. Create a list of certified dental assistants** who are willing to be available for on-call treatment if an office visit is necessary.
- 10. Be safe.** Establish protocols to maximize dentist and support staff safety if seeing patients in the office after regular business hours. Dentists should not see patients without another person present. Record the patient's name and phone number before seeing them, letting them know you are noting this information for security purposes to establish who is being seen.



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