



CNA HealthPro

Do You Have an Office Emergency Plan?

Without an emergency plan, you could be increasing the risks to patients and staff. Here are some tips on planning for the unexpected.

As a dentist, you are responsible for the safety of your staff and patients while in your office. This includes times of unexpected emergency, such as a loss of power, fire or explosion. It is important that you plan for emergency situations and the challenges they bring. For example, who would assist patients during an evacuation? If, in the middle of treatment, the electricity went out or a fire alarm sounded, how would you handle your patients?

Beyond the danger to persons, there is also the risk that your practice could be interrupted or, worse yet, your office destroyed. With preparation and planning, you can guard against lost time and lost information – information that you and your patients can't afford to lose.

Start your emergency plan with several basic safety steps:

- Observe all applicable fire prevention regulations and have a fire inspection at least annually.
- Purchase and maintain fire extinguishers sufficient to control a limited fire. Train your staff on their proper use.
- Verify that your office alarm system includes sensors that detect smoke, heat and water.
- Inspect lighted exit signs for emergency power capability.
- Be sure your office and building have emergency lighting designed to facilitate evacuation and that stairwells are shielded by fire doors.
- Comply with OSHA regulations, particularly the requirement to develop an evacuation plan.

Your comprehensive plan should address emergencies that are both internal and external to your practice. Damage to your office space due to a fire or roof collapse would directly affect your practice. However, a fire in a neighboring suite or building also may have repercussions for you. Even after the emergency evacuation, an interruption of utilities service or smoke and water damage from a fire could require you to close your office for a period of time. In areas subject to natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes and floods, it is necessary to create emergency plans tailored to these events.

Your emergency plan should include specific instructions on how to perform essential tasks. It is not sufficient to simply list "evacuation of patients" in your plan. Procedures for patient evacuation should be developed with designated staff responsibility assigned for each component task.

Once the emergency plan has been created, train your personnel to carry out emergency actions. Don't overlook instruction in the use of safety, emergency and fire-extinguishing equipment. To keep this information current, hold at least two drills each year in which you walk through a simulated emergency scenario. Then, discuss your experiences with your staff, amending the plan as necessary.

In case your office is destroyed, it is wise to keep updated copies of the following lists in a secure, off-site location:

- your patient list
- home phone numbers of staff
- phone numbers of all the people with whom you do business (insurance agent, landlord, dental laboratories, suppliers, utilities, etc.)
- daily backup files of patient and accounting records

In-office patient files should always be stored in fire-resistant cabinets. It is also a good practice to place your appointment book in a fire-resistant cabinet each night before leaving.

Do not forget to post a metal plaque near your front door indicating whom to contact in an emergency. Should a disaster occur after hours, the authorities will be able to reach you quickly.

Emergency plans and related measures are serious business for every dental practice. No matter how many precautions you take, accidents and natural disasters are always a possibility. By planning for the unexpected and conducting regular drills, you can minimize panic and confusion, protect vital information and more quickly resume normal operations.

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