

## **Tips for Oral Health Providers on Talking to Patients about COVID-19**

*On March 31st, the Indian Health Service (IHS) Division of Oral Health (authored by CDR Nathan Mork) – as part of their Oral Health Literacy Campaign – released guidance on the IHS Dental Listserv (approved by IHS Incident Command to be released via the listserv) on how to talk to dental patients about COVID-19. Below is an excerpt of questions patients may ask and how IHS recommends providers answer.*

### **1. Why is the dental clinic only seeing urgent and emergency patients?**

Like the common cold and flu viruses, the novel coronavirus can be spread through the air as well as contact with surfaces. When we work on teeth – especially cleaning teeth and preparing fillings with a drill – the virus can go from your mouth into the air, like when you sneeze or cough. Because the virus can stay in the air for several hours, this can put our dental staff as well as other patients that enter the room at risk.

### **2. I'm not feeling sick. Why can't I be seen for non-emergency care?**

Even when people don't feel sick, experts say that they could still have a virus. In fact, about 1 in 4 people with the novel coronavirus don't feel sick. To limit the spread of the virus to dental staff and other patients, we're currently only treating urgent and emergency patients.

### **3. What is considered a dental emergency?**

Emergencies are determined on a case-by-case basis. In general, swelling and pain that is not controlled with over the counter medications are considered emergencies. If you have any questions, you can talk with a dental provider on the phone to determine if you need to be seen.

### **4. Should I call the dental office first?**

Yes, during the COVID-19 response period, it's important to call the dental clinic first, instead of going directly to the dental clinic. This allows us to ask you questions about your dental concern and determine if it's necessary for you to be seen. By limiting the number of patients in the waiting area and clinic, we can decrease the chances of spreading the virus.

### **5. When can I be seen for my regular dental appointment?**

We are following the recommendations and guidance from the Indian Health Service and experts at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). We will let you know as soon as experts agree that it is safe to begin seeing non-emergency dental patients.

### **6. How safe is the dental clinic?**

We are dedicated to making our clinic safe for our patients and staff. We follow CDC guidelines to ensure that dental tools and rooms are clean for each patient.

### **7. Can I bring my children with me to the office (they're out of school)?**

Instead of bringing family members with you to your dental appointment, we recommend that you find alternative options for them. We are trying to limit the number of people in the dental clinic, to reduce the chances of spreading the virus.

**8. Can I take care of my dental problems (chipped tooth, filling out, etc.) at home instead?**

Each dental problem is unique. If you have a question about your mouth, we can review the best options for you over the phone.

**9. Is my dental cleaning considered urgent?**

Dental cleanings are not considered urgent. While we wait for guidance to begin dental cleanings again, it's important to keep up with brushing twice a day and flossing at least once a day.

**10. Does my dentist have N95 masks?**

Some dental clinics may have N95 masks. These masks are in short supply and dental clinics are trying to use them only when needed.

**11. Should I wear a mask to my appointment?**

It's very important to call your dental clinic to talk about your dental question, instead of going directly to the clinic. Over the phone, the staff will ask you about your concern as well as questions about your health (e.g. cough or fever). Most dental clinics are not designed to treat patients that may have coronavirus. If you have flu-like symptoms and a dental emergency, you will need to work with your dental provider to figure out the best place for emergency treatment.

**12. What kind of dental work can be done on me?**

In general, we're trying to avoid dental work that create aerosols (i.e. fine mist that can stay in the air for several hours). Temporary fillings - done with hand instruments instead of drills - and extractions are the least likely to create aerosols. Talk to your dental team about the emergency dental procedures they can offer.