

Life and Careers in Oral Medicine

An oral medicine doctor is trained to diagnose and manage patients with disorders of the orofacial region, essentially as a "physician of the mouth." An oral medicine doctor has received additional specialized training and experience in the diagnosis and management of oral mucosal abnormalities (growths, ulcers, infection, allergies, immune-mediated and autoimmune disorders, cancers), salivary gland disorders, temporomandibular disorders (e.g.: problems with the TMJ) and facial pain (due to musculoskeletal or neurologic conditions), taste and smell disorders; and recognition of the oral manifestations of systemic and infectious diseases.

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Procedures Performed

As part of the diagnosis and treatment of these conditions, oral medicine doctors may perform procedures such as:

- **Biopsies.** Surgical removal of tissue or bone specimen for analysis to obtain a diagnosis.
- **Ordering and interpretation of tests.** Such tests include imaging studies (x-rays, CT scans, MRIs), salivary and blood tests and microbiological investigations.
- **Medical management.** Treating with topical and systemic medications to treat a wide range of conditions.
- **Specialized injections.** Injections in the mouth or face for diagnostic purposes, or for administration of medication for pain relief, anesthesia, or inflammation

In addition, oral medicine doctors provide dental treatment or advise dentists about the treatment of patients with complex medical conditions. Oral medicine doctors receive special training in general medicine, oral pathology, and oral radiology. Dental training includes advanced general dentistry and dentistry in a hospital setting and dental treatment of medically complex patients (e.g.: cancer, transplant, heart, kidney patients).

Practice Settings

Oral medicine doctors can work at one or a combination of the following settings:

- **Private practice.** Oral medicine doctors in private practice settings provide specialized care for the orofacial conditions listed above, and general dental care to patients with complex medical conditions. These may be done in a group or solo practice setting, providing a mix of the practice of dentistry and medicine.
- **Dental and medical schools.** Oral medicine doctors generally balance their time between teaching, patient care, and research. At dental schools, they generally teach oral diagnosis and treatment planning, dental management of medically complex patients, and oral medicine topics (e.g.: mucosal abnormalities, salivary gland disorders, facial pain, etc.). At medical schools, they may teach medical students and residents about conditions of the oral cavity and orofacial region.
- **Hospital / Healthcare facility.** In hospital dental services, oral medicine doctors providing care in hospital outpatient clinics, care for inpatients, emergency rooms, and operating rooms. They often work closely with specialty service lines including oncology, stem cell and solid organ transplantation, and cardiac medicine.
- **Research / Scientific study.** Many oral medicine doctors conduct research studies and write and publish articles in the literature and textbooks on the subject of medical conditions of the orofacial region, and the dental management of complex medical conditions. They may conduct clinical research studies while treating patients in the settings listed above or perform studies/experiments in a research laboratory.

Oral Medicine Doctors in Partnership

Oral medicine doctors typically partner with and work closely with the following other types of healthcare professionals:

- General dentists and dental specialists (e.g.: oral and maxillofacial pathologists, periodontists, endodontists, oral and maxillofacial surgeons)
- Primary care physicians (e.g.: family medicine, internal medicine)
- Dermatologists
- Oncologists (cancer doctors)
- Otolaryngologists (ear, nose, and throat doctors)
- Gastroenterologists
- Rheumatologists
- Neurologists
- Plastic surgeons
- Physical therapists
- Mental health specialists (e.g.: psychiatrists and psychologists)

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