

# Post-Pandemic Dentistry: Tips for Deciding When and How to Reopen

19 May 2020  Naren Arulrajah  
896 times



Though your region may be reopening or is expected to do so soon, many dental practices are still limited to urgent care or closed entirely. But lifting restrictions doesn't mean a return to normal. The question is just what it does mean for your practice. Opening your doors means adapting to a new normal, one that will continue evolving for weeks and months to come.

## Deciding When to Reopen

Are you ready? Is the time right? Unless you can check off these essential items, the answer is probably no:

- **Regulations:** First and foremost, make sure you can open your practice. The ADA offers [an interactive map](#) detailing current state regulations. However, the timeline for reopening will be different for each state and province and possibly for individual cities.
- **Safety:** Just because it's legal to reopen doesn't mean it's safe to do so. Consider the rate of infection in your specific location, the demographics of your patient base, the health of your staff, and even the layout of your office. Do not reopen until you are confident in your ability to protect your patients and staff.
- **Supplies:** Face masks and other personal protective equipment are in short supply around the world, and that situation might not improve soon. Inventory your current supplies and verify your ability to restock. It would be a waste of time, effort, and money to reopen for a couple of weeks and then shut down due to lack of supplies.
- **Staff:** Clinicians and employees who are ill, who have been exposed to COVID-19, or who are immunocompromised may not be able to work for some time. Others may have issues such as lack of childcare. Communicate with your team, verify their availability, and address their concerns.

## First Steps

So you've decided to open your practice again. The question is how. The answer is different for every dental office. Again, the first consideration is official guidelines. Local authorities, regulatory agencies, and

professional associations will likely have some requirements and suggestions. From there, you will need to develop a unique strategy.

For most practices, the best approach is to ramp up gradually. You and your team will need time to adapt to new protocols and find the safest way to provide care.

Start one patient at a time. Instead of resuming a full schedule, consider taking just a few patients a day. Allow one person in your office. After that patient leaves, disinfect everything before the next patient enters. During the first phase, you might want to limit services to those with the lowest risk.

Plan for contactless check-in. Ideally, the patient would check in via mobile communication, eliminating face-to-face interaction with the receptionist. If that isn't feasible, consider a plexiglass shield or similar barrier.

Establish new sanitation protocols. You thought your office was clean and sterile before, but this is a whole new level. Most importantly, rigorous sanitation is no longer confined to clinical instruments and spaces. Extend those standards to the reception area, public restrooms, and office. This includes doorknobs, countertops, and other commonly contacted surfaces.

Remove unnecessary items from the reception area such as reading materials, brochures, display models, and even small toys in the kids' area. Any surface that multiple people will touch increases the risk of contamination as well the burden of cleaning and sterilization.

Communicate with your team. At first, you will want minimal staff in the office. Decide who will work, when they will work, and who will be responsible for tasks such as patient intake and office cleaning. Discuss your planned operating schedule, patient intake procedures, and other changes. Making sure that everyone understands that plan and knows their own responsibilities is key to avoiding chaos.

Communicate with patients. You might implement policies such as temperature checks and COVID-19 screening questions upon arrival, wearing facemasks while in your office, and restricting family members inside the building. Some doctors are asking patients to wait in the parking lot rather than the reception area. Your appointment scheduling and reminder protocol should include notifying patients of any new policies.

Update your marketing. Reputation management and trust building are more important than ever. It is essential that patients can find accurate and current information. As office hours and available services change, update your website, social profiles, and online listings. Add information on your website explaining what safety precautions you are taking.

Also, promote any new services such as teledentistry. Clearly indicate what procedures are temporarily unavailable. Be honest about extended delays in appointment scheduling. Lastly, continue building your search engine optimization (SEO) and content marketing so you will be well positioned to make a comeback.

### **Gradually Re-Establish Normal**

The goal is a return to a thriving and growing practice, but the best way to get there is slowly. Wait to see if supply availability holds out, if COVID-19 spread in your community continues declining, and if your safety precautions are enough. Gradually increase your workload and relax restrictions on the number of people in your office only when it is acceptable by official guidelines and you feel confident it is safe to do so.

When you begin allowing multiple people in the office, only allow a few at a time in the waiting room. Arrange chairs with space between them. Try to keep seating areas away from doorways, hallways, and other traffic areas. Be sure that your social distancing policies are clearly communicated to patients, as well as posted in your office.

### **Final Thoughts**

Remember that some degree of social distancing and extra layers of precaution may be necessary until a vaccine becomes available. Your long-term plan and timeline for ramping up should be flexible, as the situation is very fluid. We can all hope for an expedited return to normal, but be financially and logistically prepared to operate at a reduced capacity for an extended period.

**Mr. Arulrajah**, president and CEO of [Ekwa Marketing](#), has been a leader in medical marketing for more than a decade. Ekwa provides comprehensive marketing solutions for busy dentists, with a team of more than 180 full-time professionals, providing web design, hosting, content creation, social media, reputation management, SEO,

and more. If you're looking for ways to boost your marketing results, call (855) 598-3320 for a free strategy session with him.