

Informed Consent

What are consent forms?

When you or a loved one visits the dentist, you will sign some official forms called “consent forms.” Some people quickly glance at these forms and sign immediately. However, it is important to read these documents carefully. They allow you to learn more about the treatments you (or your loved one) might receive, to ask questions, and to talk to your doctor about the kind of care you want.

At your first visit, you may sign a form which describes the dental office’s policies. Your signature on this form allows the dentist and his/her staff to do some basic procedures, including x-rays and photographs. Feel free to ask questions, and ask for a copy of the document to review it later at home. Remember that a signature today does not bind you forever. You have the right to make changes in the future.

What is a treatment plan?

After the exam, the dentist may develop a “treatment plan.” This is a list of the treatments you need. If you have complex care needs, the dentist may need several visits to develop a plan. The dentist may then ask you to sign another consent form. Your signature here indicates that you understand your treatment options, the procedures described, as well as the expected costs and results. The statement also states that dentistry is not an exact science, and situations may come up that cause changes in the plan. Some dentists prefer to show you several options, including the option of no treatment. You may be asked to give your consent again before any “irreversible procedure,” such as having a tooth removed.

Who makes the decisions about care?

In some cases, you may provide consent for another person. For instance, a child under age 18 cannot give informed consent. Likewise, an aged parent or spouse with dementia or other serious mental loss cannot provide consent. A person must understand their health problem as well as their treatment options in order to give informed consent. For people who can’t do this, you may make decisions on their behalf. Most health professionals suggest that you select the treatment that you believe your loved one would want for him or herself.

How do I legally provide consent?

It is important that you have the legal power to make decisions for your loved one. If you are a legal parent or guardian, you have this power. For most other relationships, you will need to be legally assigned as the patient’s “durable power of attorney for health care,” (DPAHC) or a “proxy” or “surrogate.” Likewise, if you think you may not be able to make your own decisions in the future, you should pick your own proxy to represent you later. You should choose the person who best understands your preferences and could accurately express your wishes to the doctor.

The informed consent process is more than just signing papers. It allows the patient (or proxy) and dentist to exchange information. The dentist must educate the patient (or proxy) about the procedures and their consequences. At the same time, the patient (or proxy) must be informed and express their treatment wishes.