

# E-mail — Twenty Reasons Why You Should Have It in Your Dental Office

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Communications technology is changing and expanding at an unprecedented rate. Fifty years ago, many dentists did not have a telephone in their offices. They most certainly did not have a fax machine or a computer. Today, however, these communication tools are part of our daily routine, both in and out of the dental office. We don't need these devices to cut a Class I cavity or to perform a restoration, but they are useful when it comes time to take care of our business affairs.

One of the best "new" methods of communication is electronic mail, better known as e-mail. E-mail is a term used to describe mail that is sent from one computer to another via a computer network. With all the Internet hype going on these days, e-mail may seem like a new medium. Yet the first e-mail program was developed more than 27 years ago. Like conventional postal mail (better known now as snail mail), there is a sender and a receiver and a method for getting the message from point A to point B. The Canadian Press reports that there has been a 10% to 15% drop in the amount of letters mailed through Canada Post Corporation since electronic mail became popular ([www.canoe.ca/TechArchive/990131\\_email.html](http://www.canoe.ca/TechArchive/990131_email.html)).

Electronic mail is inexpensive and convenient. Most importantly, it represents a new communication standard for a growing number of patients and professional contacts. E-mail will not replace the telephone, but it can become a valuable business tool that will enhance your relationship with your patients.

## How Does E-mail Work?

Most e-mail is sent using a specific address for both the sender and the receiver. The standard format uses a name and an address, joined by the "at" symbol (username@location). The user name describes the e-mail account holder and the location represents the computer company that is going to handle the mail. My e-mail address is [maclean@ns.sympatico.ca](mailto:maclean@ns.sympatico.ca). It tells people that my user name is "maclean" and that my mail will be handled by Sympatico in Nova Scotia, Canada. Sym-

patico is my Internet service provider. E-mail can be sent either through private networks or the Internet.

## E-mail Features

**E-mail is popular.** In fact, e-mail is currently the most popular online activity. Nearly 50% of the U.S. population, or 135 million people, will communicate via e-mail by 2001 (<http://www.forrester.com> 1997). The 1997 Computer Industry Almanac predicts that the number of people with Internet e-mail access worldwide will grow 800% to 450 million in the next three years, up from 60 million today.

**E-mail is economical.** Once you have an e-mail account, you can usually send as many messages as you like for one monthly charge.

**E-mail is reliable.** E-mail will come back to you if it cannot be delivered. A message will appear on your screen indicating that the address is invalid. You can then go to sites like [www.people.yahoo.com](http://www.people.yahoo.com) or [www.whowhere.lycos.com](http://www.whowhere.lycos.com) to look up the correct e-mail address.

**E-mail is accessible worldwide.** You can send e-mail anywhere in the world. This is great if your kids are in university or travelling across Europe.

**E-mail is convenient.** You can retrieve your e-mail from any computer that has an Internet connection.

**E-mail is safe.** Passwords and user names keep e-mail private. For greater safety, you can use encryption to code your e-mail. Encryption scrambles the message before you send it, then unscrambles it when it gets to its destination. Many Canadian banks are currently using this technology to secure electronic transactions.

**E-mail is fast.** E-mail can reach its destination in seconds.

**E-mail is smart.** You can reply to an e-mail just by pushing one button. That's all you need to send your newly typed message back to the original sender.

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## Why Should You Have **E-mail** in Your Dental Office?

### Dental software compatibility

Some dental software companies have integrated functions that allow you to send invoices and appointment reminders to your patients via the Internet. Say goodbye to stamps and to licking and stuffing envelopes!

### Patient newsletters

Send your patients a monthly newsletter informing them of the new treatments you offer. Once you have created a mailing list, all you have to do is push one button to send the document to everyone. Either e-mail a generic text or use merge files to customize the document with personal information.

### Staff memos

Many of your staff already have e-mail. You can create a list of their addresses to send one memo to all staff at once. Minutes of your meetings can easily be attached to e-mail.

### Skip tracing

Since people don't necessarily change their e-mail address when they move, you may be able to find a patient who hasn't left a forwarding address through his or her e-mail account. Great for finding transients such as university students.

### Long distance e-mail faxing

To help you save on long-distance charges, some Internet companies allow you to e-mail a letter to another city where they will then fax it locally.

### Office signature files

Electronic letterhead can be created so that information such as your telephone and fax numbers, office address and hours, Web site address, and even brief dental health care notes, can be automatically added to every e-mail.

### Post-operative instructions

Show your patients you care by e-mailing them standardized post-operative instructions. Or set up an "E-mail Autoresponder" or "Mailbot" that will automatically respond to a patient's electronic request for information, regardless of time or place. To find out more about mailbots, send a blank e-mail to [faqmbot@nassist.com](mailto:faqmbot@nassist.com).

### Patient information and treatment plans

Send your patients information about treatment plans or refer them to one of the many Internet sites on dental treatments.

### Appointment reminders

E-mail is great for appointment reminders and confirmations.

### Patient payments

Patients can use encryption e-mail to send credit card payments to your office for processing. Eventually, they will be able to pay with "cybercash" (<http://www.cybercash.com/>).

### Communication with your dental association

Associations like to relay messages to their members in a suitable time frame. Your association can deliver an urgent message to your computer within seconds. Your opinions regarding important issues can get back to your association just as quickly.

### Communication with other dentists

Discuss treatments and procedures with a dentist who is half-way across the world or in the next province. There are approximately 16,000 dentists in Canada alone.

### Mailing lists

Join a mailing list to receive information on a particular topic of interest.

### Savings

Time is money. E-mail can be a very efficient way to send and receive information.

### Supplies and equipment

Many dental supply companies allow you to buy products over the Internet. You can also find out more about a product or piece of dental equipment you want to purchase on that company's Web site.

### Prescriptions

In the near future, you will be able to send your prescriptions to the drugstore via a secure e-mail network.

### Communication with your software company

No need to worry about time zones anymore. Send your software company an after-hours e-mail and have them call your office first thing the following business day.

### Referrals to specialists

Items such as x-rays, videos, pictures and charts can be easily attached to e-mail and sent over the Internet to your dental specialists. The originals stay in your office.

### Listserv access

A listserv is an automatic e-mailing program that sends messages back and forth like a two-way radio. Listservs are organized in topics such as dental amalgam, dentistry, oral pathology, etc. When you send a message to a listserv, it is forwarded to all its subscribers. For more information on Canadian dental listservs, try *Canada Listserv* at <http://www.canaden.com> or *Atlantic Dental Listserv* at <http://www3.ns.sympatico.ca/maclean/adl.html>. A great site about listservs and mailing lists is located at <http://www.mindspring.com/~cmcleod/maillist.html>.

### Patient interest

Many patients are excited about using this technology. They like the convenience and flexibility that e-mail offers.

The risk of infection should be weighed against the potential toxicity of the anti-retroviral drugs, but when appropriate, chemoprophylaxis must be started **within one to two hours** after the exposure and should continue for four weeks.

The recommended chemoprophylaxis is AZT 200 mg three times daily for four weeks and 3TC 150 mg twice daily for four weeks. These drugs may cause gastrointestinal symptoms (nausea, vomiting, diarrhea), fatigue, peripheral neuropathy, anemia and headache. Some of these side-effects may become debilitating while the drugs are being taken. The safety of 3TC during pregnancy has not been established.

An unfortunate reality of health care restructuring in Canada is that delays in emergency care may occur. Such delays may occur even in emergency rooms in major trauma centres where sensitization to dealing with such a health care crisis should exist. Staff from the author's dental clinic who have received known HIV-contaminated injuries have encountered delays of several hours in getting appropriate counselling and chemoprophylaxis in the emergency department of the dental clinic's own hospital, despite the author's impassioned demands for care.

Dental offices should check with their local health units or hospitals to ensure that injured personnel will be attended to **immediately** upon presentation and that the appropriate chemoprophylactic drugs are on hand for immediate administration, should they be necessary. Dental offices that treat several patients known to be living with HIV may wish to consider having at least one or two doses of these medications in their emergency drug kit, so that delays in medical attention are not a factor.

Percutaneous exposure to blood-borne pathogens such as HIV is a hazard every clinical practitioner in dentistry faces. By being properly forearmed with the necessary knowledge and protocol, practitioners can reduce the risk of seroconversion for themselves and their staff to as low as reasonably possible. Practitioners have a demanding enough practice without having to worry about the "terror factor"<sup>10</sup> of what to do if and whenever this unfortunate event occurs. ♦

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*The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinion or official policies of the Canadian Dental Association.*

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## E-mail Is Here to Stay

E-mail is fast becoming an indispensable communication tool in both the business world and the home setting. In the not-too-distant future, not having an e-mail account will be like not having a telephone. E-mail's simplicity and widespread use are just two of the reasons why you should have it in your dental office. If you have any questions about e-mail, you are likely to catch me at [maclean@ns.sympatico.ca](mailto:maclean@ns.sympatico.ca).

## Recommendations

- Start a database with a list of your patients who have e-mail.
- Ask if your dental software will have e-mail capability soon.
- Find out more about e-mail by visiting <http://203.12.60.74/internet/email.htm#What>.
- Choose a user name that is simple and easy to remember.
- Get connected to the Internet and let the fun begin! ♦

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