When I ask dental assistants how many of them uses a rubber dam, it shocking to see how few hands go up. I have heard every excuse in the book—it takes too long to place; we just use cotton rolls; retractors get the same results. With so many new and innovative dams on the market, rubber dam placement takes minutes.

What is a Rubber Dam?
The dental rubber dam is a piece of thin, stretchable latex or nonlatex material that becomes a barrier to selected teeth when applied. The isolation technique helps protect the teeth for all types of dental procedures including root canals, bleaching, and restoration preparation and delivery.

Why use a Rubber Dam?
Here are some reasons to use a rubber dam:
► Visibility is much better because of the color contrast between dam and the teeth being prepared
► Creates a dry and noncontaminated field protecting the area from saliva and other debris during all bonded procedures
► Improves access during dental procedures by retracting the lip, cheek, and tongue from the operation field
► Protects the patient from swallowing any debris such as amalgam, old porcelain, and composite removal
► Increases the efficiency and productivity, and reduces treatment time

► Adds comfort for the patient and dentist
► Infection control

Contraindicated
Here are some reasons not to use a dental dam:
► Tooth may be too short to hold a clamp
► Tooth may not be fully erupted and there is not enough tooth to clamp to
► Patients that may not be able to swallow

Size
Dental dam material is available in precut squares of 6 in × 6 in and 5 in × 5 in. The 6 in × 6 in is used for posterior applications. The 5 in × 5 in squares are for anterior application and primary detention.

Thickness
The dental dam’s thickness gauge can vary from thin, medium, and heavy. Thin is used for endodontic, medium is the most popular for easy placement, and heavy for tight contact areas or the need for stronger support of the dam.

Color
Dental dams come in a wide variety of colors. They come in colors of grey, blue, pink, purple, green, white, and yellow. They can also come scented or unscented, flavored or unflavored. Most dentists prefer the darker shades for contrast.

Dam Napkins
A dam napkin may be placed between the dental dam and the patient’s face. This helps absorb moisture and increase patient comfort.

Dam Frames
A dental frame is necessary to stabilize and stretch the dam tightly over the teeth. Frames come in plastic and metal. Both can be cold or heat sterilized.

Lubricants
Lubricant such as Ultradent Products Inc’s Ultracare or KY jelly (McNeil-PPC, Inc) can be placed on the underside of the dental dam for easier placement over the teeth and through the interproximal areas.

Dam Punch
The dental dam hole punch is used to create holes in the dental dam needed to expose the teeth that are to be isolated. The punch’s working end is used to puncture the dam for the correct hole sizes:
► Size 5 is the largest size used for anterior tooth.
► Size 4 the next size smaller used for molars.
► Size 3 is for bicuspids and canines.
► Size 2 is for maxillary anteriors and incisors.
► Size 1 is the smallest size used for mandibular anterior incisors.

Dam Templates
Sometimes it is hard to know where to cut the holes on the rubber dam. This is where a dam template is handy. The dam template and stamp inkpad allows the
assistant to know exactly where to place the holes if the teeth are out of the arch form.

**Dam Forceps**

Dental forceps are used to place and remove the dental dam clamp. The beaks of the forceps fit into the holes on the clamp’s jaws. The handles have a spring action that allowing the forceps, when squeezed, to open up and fit over the tooth. When the handles are released, so is the clamp.

**Dam Clamps**

A dental dam clamp is used to stabilize the dental dam. The dam clamp holds the dental dam secure on the end nearest the tooth that is being treated. Clamps can be ligated for security and safety of the patient from swallowing if the clamp becomes dislodged during treatment.

**Selection of Clamps**

Here is a list of clamps that can be used with dental dams:
- Anterior tooth: Use a double-bowed clamp.
- Premolar: Use a small, flat-jawed clamp.
- Mandibular molar: Use a flat-jawed clamp.
- Maxillary molar: Use a clamp with a curved jaw.
- Partially erupted: Use a clamp with subgingival design.

**Different Dams to Choose From**

Here is a list of traditional dental dams:
- Hygenic Flexi-Dam Non-Latex

Here is a list of conventional dental dams:
- OptiDam (Kerr Corporation) (Figure 2)
- Optradam (Ivoclar Vivadent, Inc) (Figure 3)

**Placement of the Traditional Dam**

Here is a step-by-step list on how to place a traditional dental dam.
- The dental dam and supplies are ready for use.
- Determine the operating field.
- Mark and punch the hole positions.
- Select the correct clamp and ligate.
- For posterior isolation, always go one tooth distal to the tooth (teeth) being treated and extend to the midline. Anterior isolation includes premolar to premolar.
- Position the clamp over the tooth with the lingual jaws of the clamp first, then the facial jaws. During the placement, you may need to keep your finger on the clamp to keep the clamp from coming off before it is properly seated on the tooth.
- Stretch the dental dam that has been punched over the anchor tooth.
- The ligature (floss) should be exposed and easy to grasp if needed.
- Position the frame over the dam and slightly pull the dam to catch on the prongs of the frame.
- Fit the last hole of the dam over the last tooth to be exposed at the opposite end of the tooth that is anchored.
- Using your index fingers stretch the dam over the clamp. For more difficult interproximal contacts, use the waxed floss such as Glide (Procter and Gamble) or Wedjets Cord (Cölnè/Whaledent, Inc). The lingual end of the floss is looped over and inserted into the contact, while down more dam with it. Remove floss by pulling both ends buccally without disturbing the dam.
- Using a black spoon (Hu-Friedy), tuck the edges of the dental dam into the gingival sulcus.
- If the patient is having problems breathing, cut a small “U” shape just under the nose so the nasal passage is not blocked and the patient can breathe easier.

**Conclusion**

A dental dam should be an easy placement for the dentist and the assistant to comply. Placement of the rubber dam should not be a nescience or an option. With today’s new systems, practice and placement makes perfect. So, why are you not using one?