

Medical Assistant

Professional Activities

Medical assistants perform routine administrative and clinical tasks to keep the offices and clinics of physicians, podiatrists, chiropractors, and optometrists running smoothly. They should not be confused with physician assistants who examine, diagnose, and treat patients under the direct supervision of a physician.

The duties of medical assistants vary from office to office, depending on office location, size, and specialty. In small practices, medical assistants usually are "generalists," handling both administrative and clinical duties and reporting directly to an office manager, physician, or other health practitioner. Those in large practices tend to specialize in a particular area under the supervision of department administrators.

Medical assistants perform many administrative duties. They answer telephones, greet patients, update and file patient medical records, fill out insurance forms, handle correspondence, schedule appointments, arrange for hospital admission and laboratory services, and handle billing and bookkeeping.

Clinical duties vary according to state law and include taking medical histories and recording vital signs, explaining treatment procedures to patients, preparing patients for examination, and assisting the physician during the examination. Medical assistants collect and prepare laboratory specimens or perform basic laboratory tests on the premises, dispose of contaminated supplies, and sterilize medical instruments. They instruct patients about medication and special diets, prepare and administer medications as directed by a physician, authorize drug refills as directed, telephone prescriptions to a pharmacy, draw blood, prepare patients for X-rays, take electrocardiograms, remove sutures, and change dressings.

Medical assistants also may arrange examining room instruments and equipment, purchase and maintain supplies and equipment, and keep waiting and examining rooms neat and clean.

Assistants who specialize have additional duties. Podiatric medical assistants make castings of feet, expose and develop X-rays, and assist podiatrists in surgery. Ophthalmic medical assistants help ophthalmologists provide medical eye care. They conduct diagnostic tests, measure and record vision, and test eye muscle function. They also show patients how to insert, remove, and care for contact lenses; and they apply eye dressings. Under the direction of the physician, they may administer eye medications. They also maintain optical and surgical instruments and may assist the ophthalmologist in surgery.

Medical assistants work in well-lit, clean environments. They constantly interact with other people, and may have to handle several responsibilities at once. Most full-time medical assistants work a regular 40-hour week. Some work part-time, evenings, or weekends.

Educational Requirements

Some medical assistants are trained on the job, but many complete 1- or 2-year programs. Almost all medical assistants have at least a high school diploma, although there are no formal education or training requirements. Medical assisting programs are offered in vocational-technical high schools, postsecondary vocational schools, and community and junior colleges. Postsecondary programs usually last either 1 year and result in a certificate or diploma, or 2 years and result in an associate degree. Courses cover anatomy, physiology, and medical terminology, as well as keyboarding, transcription, recordkeeping, accounting, and insurance processing. Students learn laboratory techniques, clinical and diagnostic procedures, pharmaceutical principles, the administration of medications, and first aid. They study office practices, patient relations, medical law, and ethics. There are two accrediting bodies that accredit medical assisting programs. Accredited programs often include an internship that provides practical experience in physicians' offices or other healthcare facilities.

Although not required, certification indicates that a medical assistant meets certain standards of knowledge. It may also help to distinguish an experienced or formally trained assistant from an entry-level assistant, which may lead to a higher salary or more employment opportunities. There are various associations—such as the American Association of Medical Assistants (AAMA) and Association of Medical Technologists (AMT)—that award certification credentials to medical assistants. The certification process varies by association. It is also possible to become certified in a specialty, such as podiatry, optometry, or ophthalmology.

Academic Programs

[Black Hawk College](#)
[Brown Mackie College-Quad Cities](#)
[CALC Institute of Technology](#)
[Carl Sandburg College](#)
[CET-Chicago](#)
[College of DuPage](#)
[College of Lake County](#)
[Coyne American Institute Inc](#)
[Everest College](#)
[First Institute Inc](#)
[Fox College Inc](#)
[Harper College](#)
[Highland Community College](#)
[Illinois Central College](#)
[Lincoln Trail College](#)
[Olney Central College](#)
[Illinois School of Health Careers](#)
[John A Logan College](#)

[Joliet Junior College](#)
[Kankakee Community College](#)
[Midstate College](#)
[Midwest Technical Institute](#)
[Moraine Valley Community College](#)
[National Latino Education Institute](#)
[Northwestern College](#)
[Parkland College](#)
[Rasmussen College](#)
[Robert Morris University Illinois](#)
[Rockford Career College](#)
[Sanford-Brown College](#)
[South Suburban College](#)
[Southwestern Illinois College](#)
[Spoon River College](#)
[Triton College](#)
[Waubensee Community College](#)
[Westwood College](#)

Employment/Salary Outlook

Employment of medical assistants is expected to grow 34 percent from 2008 to 2018, much faster than the average for all occupations. As the healthcare industry expands because of technological advances in medicine and the growth and aging of the population, there will be an increased need for all healthcare workers. The increasing prevalence of certain conditions, such as obesity and diabetes, also will increase demand for healthcare services and medical assistants. Increasing use of medical assistants to allow doctors to care for more patients will further stimulate job growth.

Helping to drive job growth is the increasing number of group practices, clinics, and other healthcare facilities that need a high proportion of support personnel, particularly medical assistants who can handle both administrative and clinical duties. In addition, medical assistants work mostly in primary care, a consistently growing sector of the healthcare industry.

State and National Wages

Location	Pay Period	2009				
		10%	25%	Median	75%	90%
United States	Hourly	\$9.98	\$11.57	\$13.77	\$16.23	\$19.21
	Yearly	\$20,800	\$24,100	\$28,600	\$33,800	\$40,000
Illinois	Hourly	\$10.11	\$11.76	\$14.06	\$16.75	\$19.87
	Yearly	\$21,000	\$24,500	\$29,200	\$34,800	\$41,300

State and National Trends

United States	Employment	Percent	Job Openings ¹
---------------	------------	---------	---

	2008	2018	Change	
Medical assistants	483,600	647,500	+34%	21,780
Illinois	Employment		Percent Change	Job Openings ¹
	2008	2018		
Medical assistants	16,320	20,830	+28%	630

¹Job Openings refers to the average annual job openings due to growth and net replacement.

Professional Information

American Association of Medical Assistants
 20 N. Wacker Dr., Ste. 1575
 Chicago, IL 60606
 Phone: 312/899-1500
<http://www.aama-ntl.org/>

American Medical Technologists
 10700 West Higgins, Suite 150
 Rosemont, IL 60018
 Phone: 847.823.5169
<http://www.amt1.com>

References

Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2010-11 Edition, Medical Assistants, on the Internet at <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos164.htm>

O*NET OnLine, on the Internet at <http://online.onetcenter.org/link/summary/31-9092.00>

Date Last Modified: May 18, 2011