

Physician Assistant

Professional Activities

Physician assistants, also known as PAs, practice medicine on a team under the supervision of physicians and surgeons. They are formally educated to examine patients, diagnose injuries and illnesses, and provide treatment.

Physician assistants typically do the following:

- Review patients' medical histories
- Conduct physical exams to check patients' health
- Order and interpret diagnostic tests, such as x rays or blood tests
- Make diagnosis concerning a patient's injury or illness
- Give treatment, such as setting broken bones and immunizing patients
- Educate and counsel patients and their families—for example, answering questions about how to care for a child with asthma
- Prescribe medicine when needed
- Record a patient's progress
- Research the latest treatments to ensure the quality of patient care
- Conduct or participate in outreach programs; talking to groups about managing diseases and promoting wellness

Physician assistants work under the supervision of a physician or surgeon; however, their specific duties and the extent to which they must be supervised differ from state to state.

Physician assistants work in all areas of medicine, including primary care and family medicine, emergency medicine, and psychiatry. The work of physician assistants depends in large part on their specialty and what their supervising physician needs them to do. For example, a physician assistant working in surgery may close incisions and provide care before and after the operation. A physician assistant working in pediatrics may examine a child and give routine vaccinations.

In rural and medically underserved areas, physician assistants may be the primary care providers at clinics where a physician is present only 1 or 2 days per week. In these locations, physician assistants confer with the physician and other healthcare workers as needed and as required by law.

Some physician assistants make house calls or visit nursing homes to treat patients, reporting back to the physician afterward.

Physician assistants are different from medical assistants. Medical assistants do routine clinical and clerical tasks and they do not practice medicine.

Educational Requirements

Most applicants to physician assistant education programs already have a bachelor's degree and some healthcare-related work experience. While admissions requirements vary from program to program, most programs require four years of undergraduate coursework with a focus in science.

Many applicants already have experience as registered nurses or as EMTs and paramedics before they apply to a physician assistant program.

Physician assistant education programs usually take at least 2 years of full-time study. In 2012, the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant, Inc. (ARC-PA) accredited 170 education programs. Most of these accredited programs offer a master's degree.

Physician assistant education includes classroom and laboratory instruction in subjects such as pathology, human anatomy, physiology, clinical medicine, pharmacology, physical diagnosis, and medical ethics. The programs also include hundreds of hours of supervised clinical training in several areas, including family medicine, internal medicine, emergency medicine, and pediatrics.

Sometimes students serve in one or more of these areas under the supervision of a physician who is looking to hire a physician assistant. In this way, the rotation may lead to permanent employment.

All states require physician assistants to be licensed.

Licenses, Certification, and Registrations

All states and the District of Columbia require physician assistants to be licensed. To become licensed, they must pass the Physician Assistant National Certifying Examination (PANCE) from the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA). A physician assistant who passes the exam may use the credential "Physician Assistant-Certified (PA-C)."

To keep their certification, physician assistants must complete 100 hours of continuing education every 2 years. Beginning in 2014, the recertification exam will be required every 10 years.

Academic Programs

[Midwestern University \(Downers Grove\)](#)
[Northwestern University](#)
[Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine](#)

[Rush University](#)
[Southern Illinois University](#)

Employment/Salary Outlook

Demand for healthcare services will increase because of the growing and aging population. More people means more need for healthcare specialists, and as the large baby-boom generation ages, it will require more healthcare. This, coupled with an increase in several chronic diseases such as diabetes, will drive the need for physician assistants to provide preventive care and treat those who are sick.

Physician assistants, who can perform many of the same services as doctors, are expected to have a larger role in giving routine care because they are more cost effective than physicians. As more physicians retire or enter specialty areas of medicine, more physician assistants are expected to take on the role of primary care provider. Furthermore, the number of individuals who have access to primary care services will increase as a result of federal health insurance reform.

The role of physician assistants is expected to expand as states continue to allow assistants to do more procedures and as insurance companies expand their coverage of physician assistant services.

State and National Wages

Location	Pay Period	2021		
		Low	Median	High
United States	Hourly	\$37.47	\$58.43	\$79.14
	Annual	\$77,940	\$121,530	\$164,620
Illinois	Hourly	\$42.84	\$58.22	\$77.78
	Annual	\$89,1100	\$121,100	\$161,790

State and National Trends

United States	Employment		Percent Change	Job Openings ¹
	2021	2031		
Physician Assistant	139,100	177,500	28%	12,700
Illinois	Employment		Percent Change	Job Openings ¹
	2020	2030		
Physician Assistant	4,310	5,360	24%	370

Professional Organizations

American Academy of Physician Assistants (aapa.org)

National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (nccpa.net)

References

Occupational Outlook Handbook, U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics
(<http://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/physician-assistants.htm>)

O*NET OnLine (<http://www.onetonline.org/link/summary/29-1071.00>)

CareerOneStop ([http://www.careerinfonet.org/physician assistants](http://www.careerinfonet.org/physician%20assistants))

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