

# Physicians Assistants

- **Physician Assistant Careers: The Basics**
  - Physician assistants work in collaboration with a licensed physician to provide medical care to patients. Duties include diagnosing and treating illnesses, performing physical examinations, assisting in surgeries, making rounds in hospitals, and performing assigned tasks during a procedure. They may conduct physical exams, order different types of tests, develop treatment plans, write prescriptions, or monitor patients in hospital or medical facilities. Specific duties depend on the setting, state laws, and specialty area of individual PAs. This is a very patient-focused role and requires strong interpersonal skills.
- **Physician Assistant Careers: In-Depth**
  - Physician assistant degree programs typically include 2,000 hours or more of clinical rotations, providing the PA with the applied experience needed to work in a variety of clinical and medical settings. A certified physician assistant is responsible for performing many tasks and procedures under the supervision of a doctor or other medical professional. They may work in a specific field, such as family medicine, internal medicine, general surgery, obstetrics and gynecology, emergency medicine, or psychiatry.
- **Physician Assistant Salaries**
  - Becoming a physician assistant can be a lucrative career path for those seeking support roles in a hospital or clinical setting. Since demand for physician assistants is expected to increase rapidly over the next decade, salaries will remain competitive.
  - The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports the highest-paying positions for physician assistants can be found in outpatient care centers, general medical and surgical hospitals, and physician's offices. The median annual wage for physician assistants in 2014 was \$97,280. The top five states with the highest employment level and higher salaries are:
- **Steps to Becoming a Physician Assistant**
  - Earn a Bachelor's Degree
    - Though prospective physician assistants can major in any area, a degree in health science provides the background knowledge needed when pursuing entry-level positions or advanced study. An undergraduate program may include the following courses:
      - Medical Terminology
      - Statistics
      - Healthcare Ethics
      - Quantitative Methods

- Most PA programs require applicants have at least three years of healthcare experience. Popular choices for gaining this experience include working as an EMT, paramedic, or nurse before applying.
  - **Earn a Master's Degree**
    - After earning a bachelor's degree, some students go on to complete a two-year master's physician assistant program. PA programs include classroom and clinical instruction in the following subjects:
      - Anatomy
      - Physiology
      - Pathology
      - Clinical Medicine
      - Medical Laws and Ethics
      - Pharmacology
    - Another road to become a physician assistant includes completing a rigorous physician assistant bachelor's degree (BA-PA). This allows students to receive a bachelor's degree while simultaneously earning a graduate-level PA certificate, saving both time and money.
    - Master's degree requirements vary by school but most mandate at least 2,000 clinical hours be completed before entering the field. Some schools offer a physician assistant shadowing program or internship opportunities to fulfill the clinical rotation requirement. Prospective students must ensure any program under consideration is accredited by the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA).
  - **Pass the Physician Assistant National Certifying Exam (PANCE)**
    - After completing a program accredited by the ARC-PA, graduates must pass the Physician Assistant National Certifying Exam (PANCE). Only those who graduate from an ARC-PA program may sit for the exam. The test is five hours long and consists of 300 multiple-choice questions designed to assess basic medical and surgical knowledge. Candidates may take the text six times over a period of six years. If a student does not pass within this timeframe, they must complete another ARC-PA educational program before attempting the exam again.
  - **Maintain Certification**
    - Certified physician assistants need to take the Physician Assistant National Recertifying Exam (PANRE) during the last two years of the six-year certification maintenance or the 10-year certification maintenance cycle. The National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA) offers practice exams to help PAs prepare for the PANRE.
- **Types of Physician Assistant Degrees**
  - Physician assistant programs can be very competitive and most require applicants to have existing work experience before being admitted. Popular options for gaining experience include working as an EMT, paramedic, medical assistant, or

emergency room technician. Once enrolled, students study a variety of topics similar to those of a pre-med program.

- At the graduate level, students are required to have a bachelor's degree in a healthcare-related field and approximately three years of practical experience before applying to a master's program. These typically take three years to complete and incorporate both classroom-based courses and clinical rotations. To become a physician assistant-certified (PA-C), graduates must pass the Physician Assistant National Certifying Exam (PANCE), administered by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA). They must also obtain a state license in order to practice, and complete 100 hours of continuing medical education every two years. Every 10 years, physician assistants must take the Physical Assistant National Rectifying Exam.

- **Bachelor's Degrees**

- A bachelor's degree specifically in physician assisting isn't offered at most colleges and universities. Instead, those who know they want to pursue this career can earn a four-year degree in related disciplines such as those mentioned above. At some colleges, these programs also offer physician assistant tracks to prepare students for a master's program. At this level, students cover key subjects such as human anatomy and physiology, psychology, medical physiology, pharmacology, and principles of clinical medicine. Graduates will have a thorough understanding of the physician assistant profession, ethical and moral behavior in the practice of medicine, and how to provide primary care services. In addition to classroom-based courses, students will also take part in a clinical component to gain hands-on experience working directly with patients and in a medical setting.

- Below are some examples of courses commonly offered at the undergraduate level:

- **Professionalism and Ethics in Physician Assistant Practice**

- Ethical and professional issues a PA must address throughout their career and theory-based evaluation methods for various clinical dilemmas and situations.
- Skills & Knowledge Gained
  - Fundamental principles of ethics working with patients and physicians
  - Ethical evaluation of clinical dilemmas
  - Informed consent
  - Principles of autonomy

- **Principals of Clinical Medicine**

- Fundamentals of physician services, including working with different patient populations and managing patients in different types of clinical environments
- Skills & Knowledge Gained

- Study of disease encountered in ambulatory and hospital settings
  - Implementing patient management plans
  - Managing patient referrals
  - Sound decision making at all levels
- **Pharmacology**
  - General principles of pharmacology and its applications in-patient care. Covers dose-response relationships, classes of pharmaceuticals, and drug interactions in the body.
  - Skills & Knowledge Gained
    - Patient instruction and counseling
    - Compliance with prescribed therapeutic regimens
    - Writing prescriptions
- **Community and Public Health**
  - Practical knowledge of the health system, healthcare policy, and community healthcare systems; topics in health maintenance and disease prevention strategies to better serve the community.
  - Skills & Knowledge Gained
    - Health maintenance
    - Disease prevention
    - Impact of ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation on the community
- **Principles of Emergency Medicine and Surgery**
  - Fundamentals of surgical disease and an introduction to life support techniques used to handle acute medical situations and take care of trauma patients.
  - Skills & Knowledge Gained
    - Fundamentals of preoperative care
    - Emergent care practices
    - Handling life-threatening illness and injury
- **Master's Degrees**
  - A master's degree is the minimum education requirement for becoming a physician assistant. The first half of the three-year program is typically devoted to courses such as health care ethics, health care policy, and health care management, while the remaining time is spent gaining clinical experience. Throughout the course, students will develop advanced problem solving, critical thinking, and interpersonal skills that will serve them well once working with doctors and nurses in a medical setting. Classes are focused on preparing students to deliver quality patient care while also supporting a primary healthcare provider, surgeon, or other medical professional.

- Students will be required to submit a thesis and complete a set number of hours in supervised clinical practice before graduating. Only students who have completed a master's level program are eligible to obtain state licensure.
  - **Introduction to the Physician Assistant Profession**
    - Comprehensive understanding of the role of a physician assistant within the healthcare system, federal programs that support the profession, and general responsibilities
    - Skills & Knowledge Gained
      - Understanding of healthcare delivery systems
      - Federal programs and initiatives in health care delivery
      - Risk management and quality assurance
  - **Fundamentals of Clinical Medicine**
    - Effective clinical care practices to build relationships with patients and physicians in a medical setting; ethical behavior in clinical practice and professional code of conduct.
    - Skills & Knowledge Gained
      - Study of the disease process
      - Managing medical problems in the primary care setting
      - Differential diagnosis of symptoms
      - Clinical problem solving
  - **Pharmacotherapeutics**
    - Principles of pharmacotherapeutics and prescription practices; may include topics in pharmacodynamics, clinical pharmacokinetics, and basic pharmacological principles
    - Skills & Knowledge Gained
      - Principles of pharmacotherapy
      - Individualizing medication regimens
      - Drug safety and drug mechanisms
      - Pharmacotherapy decision making skills
  - **Pathophysiology**
    - Comprehensive understanding of the mechanism of disease; study of cellular and systemic physiology, and problems associated with the major organ systems.
    - Skills & Knowledge Gained
      - Basic physiologic regulatory mechanisms
      - Clinical correlations for the treatment of disease
      - Mechanism of disease as a physician assistant
  - **Research Methods for Health Professionals**

- In-depth understanding of research methods and research findings, guidelines on evaluating different research methods, and analytical review of healthcare research trends and studies
- Skills & Knowledge Gained
  - Characteristics of research studies
  - Methods of control in experimental research
  - Internal and external validity
  - Experimental research designs
- After completing a master's degree, graduates will have the skills and knowledge necessary to provide effective support to physicians and doctors. Below is a look at some of those skills:
  - **Clinical competence**
    - Graduates will be able to address the needs of patients in hospitals, emergency care facilities, and other medical settings. They learn how to handle all types of patient needs and situations promptly and effectively. These skills are mastered through continuous training and hands-on experience gained during clinical rotations and supervised practice.
  - **Effective communication skills**
    - Physician assistants are responsible for communicating directly with patients and colleagues in a variety of settings, often in high-stress conditions. The ability to communicate clearly and effectively is a key component of success in this field. Graduates will be equipped with the necessary skills to address the needs of their patients and their teams, and ensure relevant information is delivered in an appropriate and timely manner.
  - **Operational Management**
    - In addition to providing help during a procedure or treatment, physician assistants are also responsible for taking care of clerical tasks and overseeing operations. These essential organizational and operational management skills will be developed during the degree program, ensuring graduates are able to handle the administrative side of clinical operations.
  - **Adaptability and flexibility**
    - Physician assistants are often required to wear many hats over the course of the day and must deal with stressful, unpredictable situations. They may be responsible for handling emergency visits, assisting physicians with unexpected procedures or new protocol, and supporting

new patients during the intake process. They must be adaptable, flexible, and able to work effectively in any setting.

- **Service-Oriented**
  - Physician assistants are trained to provide excellent service, both to their patients and to medical professionals who supervise them. They must approach their days with a service-oriented mindset and be able to perform job duties both independently and as part of a team. Clinical rotations and hands-on work experience develop these skills and encourage graduates to actively seek out opportunities for helping others.
- **Online Physician Assistant Programs**
  - While the majority of physician assistant program credits involve hands-on training and clinical work, some courses can often be completed online. Because many students are also working, the flexibility afforded by online education is an attractive benefit. A few things to consider when searching for online physician assistant programs are listed below:
  - **Accreditation**
    - Accreditation ensures that the education provided by an institution meets rigorous quality standards. For the aspiring physician assistant, however, earning a degree from an accredited college serves another important purpose. In order to obtain a physician assistant license after graduation, students must complete their training at an accredited college or university. The Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA) is the accrediting agency that sets the standards for physician assistant education in the United States.
  - **Lab and clinical rotation requirements**
    - Physician assistants need significant real-world training in order to be successful in their careers, including opportunities to work directly with patients and as a team in a healthcare setting. All accredited online physician assistant programs require students to complete a mixture of courses and laboratory instruction. Students are required to complete a set number of hours at an onsite location during clinical rotations, which often take place at a nearby healthcare facility, hospital, or other medical center.
  - **Faculty with healthcare experience**
    - The quality of an educational experience is directly linked to the professors and staff members teaching the coursework. It is important to determine whether the faculty members have worked in the field over the course of their careers. This type of real world experience and insight will be valuable to aspiring PAs. Students may also be able to turn to these faculty members for mentorship and guidance throughout their careers.