



## Medical Assistant Overview

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### The Field

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

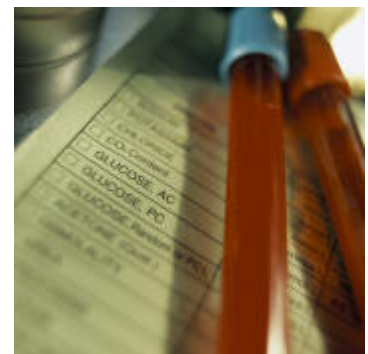
The duties of medical assistants vary from office to office, depending on the location and size of the practice and the practitioner's specialty. In small practices, medical assistants usually do many different kinds of tasks, handling both administrative and clinical duties and reporting directly to 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 who perform administrative tasks have many duties. They update and file patients' medical records, fill out insurance forms, and arrange for hospital admissions and laboratory services. They also perform tasks less specific to medical settings, such as answering telephones, greeting patients, handling correspondence, scheduling appointments, and handling billing and bookkeeping.

For clinical medical assistants, duties vary according to what is allowed by state law. Some common tasks include taking medical histories and recording vital signs, explaining treatment procedures to patients, preparing patients for examinations, and assisting physicians during examinations. Medical assistants collect and prepare laboratory specimens and sometimes perform basic laboratory tests on the premises, dispose of contaminated supplies, and sterilize medical instruments.

They might instruct patients about medications 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.



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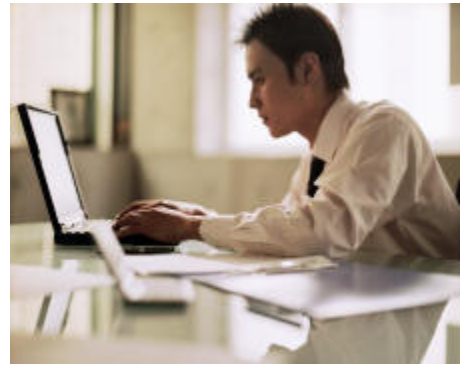
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Note: Some resources in this section are provided by the US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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## Preparation

Some medical assistants are trained on the job, but many complete 1-year or 2-year programs. Postsecondary medical assisting programs are offered in vocational-technical high schools, postsecondary vocational schools, and community and junior colleges. 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 typing, 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 various organizations that accredit medical assisting programs. Programs are accredited by the Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools ([www.abhes.org](http://www.abhes.org)). Accredited programs often include an internship that provides practical experience in physicians' offices, hospitals, or other health care facilities.

Formal training in medical assisting, while generally preferred, is not always required. Some medical assistants are trained on the job, although this practice is less common than in the past. Applicants usually need a high school diploma or the equivalent. Recommended high school courses include mathematics, health, biology, typing, bookkeeping, computers, and office skills. Volunteer experience in the health care field also is helpful. Medical assistants who are trained on the job usually spend their first few months attending training sessions and working closely with more experienced workers. Some states allow medical assistants to perform more advanced procedures, such as giving injections, after passing a test or taking a course. Employers prefer to hire experienced workers or those who are certified. Although not required, certification indicates that a medical assistant meets certain standards of competence. There are various associations that award certification credentials to medical assistants, and the certification process varies. It also is possible to become certified in a specialty, such as podiatry, optometry, or ophthalmology.

Medical assistants deal with the public; therefore, they must be neat and well groomed and have a courteous, pleasant manner and they must be able to put patients at ease and explain physicians' instructions. They must respect the confidential nature of medical information. Clinical duties require a reasonable level of manual dexterity and visual acuity.

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## Day in the Life

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. However, many medical assistants work part time, evenings, or weekends. Medical assistants may advance to other occupations through experience or additional training. For example, some may go on to teach medical assisting, and others pursue additional education to become nurses or other health care workers. Administrative medical assistants may advance to office manager, or qualify for a variety of administrative support occupations.

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## Earnings

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, the earnings of medical assistants vary, depending on their experience, skill level, and location. Median annual earnings of wage-and-salary medical assistants are about \$26,290. The middle 50 percent earn between \$21,970 and \$31,210. The lowest 10 percent earn less than \$18,860, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$36,840. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of medical assistants are about:

General medical and surgical hospitals	\$27,340
Outpatient care centers	\$26,840
Offices of physicians	\$26,620
Offices of chiropractors	\$22,940
Offices of optometrists	\$22,850

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## Employment

Medical assistants hold about 417,000 jobs in the United States. About 62 percent work in offices of physicians; 12 percent work in public and private hospitals, including inpatient and outpatient facilities; and 11 percent work in offices of other health practitioners, such as chiropractors, optometrists, and podiatrists. Most of the remainder work in other health care industries such as outpatient care centers and nursing and residential care facilities.

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## Career Path Forecast

Employment of medical assistants is expected to grow 35 percent from 2006 to 2016, much faster than the average for all occupations. As the health care industry expands because of technological advances in medicine and the growth and aging of the population, there will be an increased need for all health care workers. Increasing use of medical assistants in the rapidly growing health care industry will further stimulate job growth. Helping to drive job growth is the increasing number of group practices, clinics, and other health care 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 primarily in outpatient settings, a rapidly growing sector of the health care industry.



Job seekers who want to work as a medical assistant should find excellent job prospects. Medical assistants are projected to account for a very large number of new jobs, and many other opportunities will come from the need to replace workers leaving the occupation. Those with formal training or experience -- particularly those with certification -- should have the best job opportunities.

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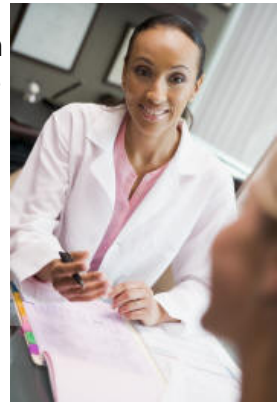
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## Professional Organizations

Professional societies provide an excellent means of keeping current and in touch with other professionals in the field. These groups can play a key role in your development and keep you abreast of what is happening in your field. Associations promote the interests of their members and provide a network of contacts that can help you find jobs and move your career forward. They can offer a variety of services including job referral services, continuing education courses, insurance, travel benefits, periodicals, and meeting and conference opportunities. The following is a partial list of professional associations serving Medical Assistants.



- ▶ **American Association of Medical Assistants ([www.aama-ntl.org](http://www.aama-ntl.org))**
- ▶ **American Society of Podiatric Medical Assistants ([www.aspma.org](http://www.aspma.org))**
- ▶ **Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools ([www.abhes.org](http://www.abhes.org))**

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