

## Physician Assistants Overview

### Overview - Preparation - Day in the Life - Earnings - Employment - Career Path Forecast - Professional Organizations

#### Overview

Physician assistants (PAs) practice medicine under the supervision of physicians and surgeons. They should not be confused with medical assistants, who perform routine clinical and clerical tasks. PAs are formally trained to provide diagnostic, therapeutic, and preventive health care services, as delegated by a physician. Working as members of the health care team, they take medical histories, examine and treat patients, order and interpret laboratory tests and x rays, and make diagnoses. They also treat minor injuries, by suturing, splinting, and casting. PAs record progress notes, instruct and counsel patients, and order or carry out therapy. In 48 States and the District of Columbia, physician assistants may prescribe medications. PAs also may have managerial duties. Some order medical supplies or equipment and supervise technicians and assistants.



Physician assistants work under the supervision of a physician. However, PAs may be the principal care providers in rural or inner city clinics, where a physician is present for only 1 or 2 days each week. In such cases, the PA confers with the supervising physician and other medical professionals as needed and as required by law. PAs also may make house calls or go to hospitals and nursing care facilities to check on patients, after which they report back to the physician.

The duties of physician assistants are determined by the supervising physician and by State law. Aspiring PAs should investigate the laws and regulations in the States in which they wish to practice.

Many PAs work in primary care specialties, such as general internal medicine, pediatrics, and family medicine. Other specialty areas include general and thoracic surgery, emergency medicine, orthopedics, and geriatrics. PAs specializing in surgery provide preoperative and postoperative care and may work as first or second assistants during major surgery.



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## Preparation

All States require that PAs complete an accredited, formal education program and pass a National exam to obtain a license. PA programs usually last at least 2 years and are full time. Most programs are in schools of allied health, academic health centers, medical schools, or 4-year colleges; a few are in community colleges, the military, or hospitals. Many accredited PA programs have clinical teaching affiliations with medical schools.



In 2007, more than 136 education programs for physician assistants were accredited or provisionally accredited by the American Academy of Physician Assistants. More than 90 of these programs offered the option of a master's degree, and the rest offered either a bachelor's degree or an associate degree. Most applicants to PA educational programs already have a bachelor's degree.

Admission requirements vary, but many programs require 2 years of college and some work experience in the health care field. Students should take courses in biology, English, chemistry, mathematics, psychology, and the social sciences. Many PAs have prior experience as registered nurses, while others come from varied backgrounds, including military corpsman/medics and allied health occupations such as respiratory therapists, physical therapists, and emergency medical technicians and paramedics.

PA education includes classroom instruction in biochemistry, pathology, human anatomy, physiology, microbiology, clinical pharmacology, clinical medicine, geriatric and home health care, disease prevention, and medical ethics. Students obtain supervised clinical training in several areas, including family medicine, internal medicine, surgery, prenatal care and gynecology, geriatrics, emergency medicine, psychiatry, and pediatrics. Sometimes, PA students serve one or more of these "rotations" under the supervision of a physician who is seeking to hire a PA. The rotations often lead to permanent employment.



All States and the District of Columbia have legislation governing the qualifications or practice of physician assistants. All jurisdictions require physician assistants to pass the Physician Assistant National Certifying Examination, administered by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA) and open only to graduates of accredited PA education programs. Only those successfully completing the examination may use the credential "Physician Assistant-Certified." In order to remain certified, PAs must complete 100 hours of continuing medical education every 2 years. Every 6 years, they must pass a recertification examination or complete an alternative program combining learning experiences and a take-home examination.



Some PAs pursue additional education in a specialty such as surgery, neonatology, or emergency medicine. PA postgraduate educational programs are available in areas such as internal medicine, rural primary care, emergency medicine, surgery, pediatrics, neonatology, and occupational medicine. Candidates must be graduates of an accredited program and be certified by the NCCPA.

Physician assistants need leadership skills, self-confidence, and emotional stability. They must be willing to continue studying throughout their career to keep up with medical advances.

As they attain greater clinical knowledge and experience, PAs can advance to added responsibilities and higher earnings. However, by the very nature of the profession, clinically practicing PAs always are supervised by physicians.

### ► Accredited Programs

Accreditation represents the highest standard of achievement for veterinary medical education in the United States. Institutions that earn accreditation confirm their commitment to quality and continuous improvement through a rigorous and comprehensive peer review. All PA educational programs are accredited by one body, the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA).

<p><b>Alabama</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University of Alabama at Birmingham</li> <li>• University of South Alabama</li> </ul> <p><b>Arkansas</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harding University</li> </ul> <p><b>Arizona</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arizona School of Health Sciences</li> <li>• Midwestern University</li> </ul> <p><b>California</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science</li> <li>• Keck School of Medicine of the University of Southern California</li> <li>• Loma Linda University</li> <li>• Riverside County Regional Medical Center/Riverside Community College</li> <li>• Samuel Merritt College</li> <li>• San Joaquin Valley College</li> <li>• Stanford University School of Medicine</li> <li>• Touro University - California College of Health Sciences</li> <li>• University of California - Davis</li> <li>• Western University of Health Sciences</li> </ul> <p><b>Colorado</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Red Rocks Community College</li> <li>• University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center</li> </ul> <p><b>Connecticut</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quinnipiac University</li> <li>• Yale University School of Medicine</li> </ul> <p><b>District of Columbia</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• George Washington University</li> <li>• Howard University</li> </ul>	<p><b>New Hampshire</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences - Manchester</li> </ul> <p><b>New Jersey</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seton Hall University</li> <li>• University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey</li> </ul> <p><b>New Mexico</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The University of New Mexico School of Medicine</li> <li>• University of St. Francis</li> </ul> <p><b>New York</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Albany Medical College</li> <li>• CUNY York College</li> <li>• D'Youville College</li> <li>• Daemen College</li> <li>• Hofstra University</li> <li>• Le Moyne College</li> <li>• Long Island University</li> <li>• Mercy College</li> <li>• New York Institute of Technology</li> <li>• Pace University-Lenox Hill Hospital</li> <li>• Rochester Institute of Technology</li> <li>• SUNY/Downstate Medical Center</li> <li>• St. Vincent Catholic Medical Centers of New York</li> <li>• Stony Brook University - SUNY</li> <li>• Sophie Davis School of Biomedical Education</li> <li>• Touro College</li> <li>• Wagner College/Staten Island University Hospital</li> <li>• Weill Cornell Medical College</li> </ul> <p><b>North Carolina</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Duke University Medical Center</li> <li>• East Carolina University</li> <li>• Methodist College</li> <li>• Wake Forest University</li> </ul>
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Prepared as part of the Sloan Career Cornerstone Center ([www.careercornerstone.org](http://www.careercornerstone.org))

<b>Florida</b>	<b>North Dakota</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Barry University School of Graduate Medical Sciences</li> <li>• Miami Dade College</li> <li>• Nova Southeastern University</li> <li>• Nova Southeastern University-Naples</li> <li>• University of Florida</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University of North Dakota</li> </ul>
<b>Georgia</b>	<b>Ohio</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emory University School of Medicine</li> <li>• Medical College of Georgia</li> <li>• South University</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cuyahoga Community College</li> <li>• Kettering College of Medical Arts</li> <li>• Marietta College</li> <li>• The University of Findlay</li> <li>• University of Toledo</li> </ul>
<b>Iowa</b>	<b>Oklahoma</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Des Moines University</li> <li>• University of Iowa</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University of Oklahoma</li> </ul>
<b>Idaho</b>	<b>Oregon</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Idaho State University</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oregon Health Sciences University</li> <li>• Pacific University</li> </ul>
<b>Illinois</b>	<b>Pennsylvania</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cook County/Malcolm X College</li> <li>• Midwestern University</li> <li>• Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science</li> <li>• Southern Illinois University at Carbondale</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arcadia University</li> <li>• Chatham College</li> <li>• DeSales University</li> <li>• Drexel University</li> <li>• Duquesne University</li> <li>• Gannon University</li> <li>• Kings College</li> <li>• Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania</li> <li>• Marywood University</li> <li>• Pennsylvania College of Technology</li> <li>• Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine</li> <li>• Philadelphia University</li> <li>• Saint Francis University</li> <li>• Seton Hill University</li> </ul>
<b>Indiana</b>	<b>South Carolina</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Butler University</li> <li>• University of Saint Francis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medical University of South Carolina</li> </ul>
<b>Kansas</b>	<b>South Dakota</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wichita State University</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University of South Dakota</li> </ul>
<b>Kentucky</b>	<b>Tennessee</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University of Kentucky</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trevecca Nazarene University</li> </ul>
<b>Louisiana</b>	<b>Texas</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center</li> <li>• Our Lady of the Lake College</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Baylor College of Medicine</li> <li>• Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center</li> <li>• The University of Texas - Pan American</li> <li>• The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio</li> <li>• The University of Texas Medical Branch</li> <li>• University of North Texas</li> <li>• University of Texas, SW Medical Center at Dallas</li> </ul>
<b>Maine</b>	<b>Utah</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The University of New England</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University of Utah</li> </ul>
<b>Maryland</b>	<b>Virginia</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anne Arundel Community College</li> <li>• Towson University - CCBC Essex</li> <li>• University of Maryland-Eastern Shore</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eastern Virginia Medical School</li> <li>• James Madison University</li> <li>• Jefferson College of Health Sciences</li> <li>• Shenandoah University</li> </ul>
<b>Massachusetts</b>	<b>Washington</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences</li> <li>• Northeastern University</li> <li>• Springfield College</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University of Washington</li> </ul>
<b>Michigan</b>	<b>West Virginia</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Central Michigan University</li> <li>• Grand Valley State University</li> <li>• University of Detroit Mercy</li> <li>• Wayne State University</li> <li>• Western Michigan University</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alderson Broaddus College</li> <li>• Mountain State University</li> </ul>
<b>Minnesota</b>	<b>Wisconsin</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Augsburg College</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marquette University</li> <li>• University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse-Gunderson Lutheran Medical Foundation</li> <li>• University of Wisconsin-Madison</li> </ul>
<b>Missouri</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Missouri State University</li> <li>• Saint Louis University</li> </ul>	
<b>Montana</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rocky Mountain College</li> </ul>	
<b>Nebraska</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Union College</li> <li>• University of Nebraska Medical Center</li> </ul>	
<b>Nevada</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Touro University</li> </ul>	

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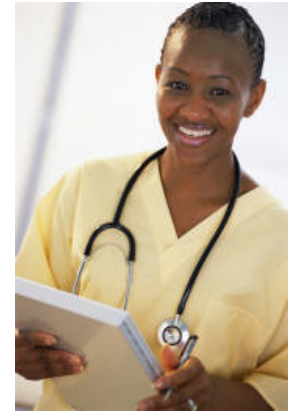
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## Day in the Life

Although Physician Assistants (PAs) usually work in a comfortable, well-lit environment, those in surgery often stand for long periods, and others do considerable walking.

Schedules vary according to the practice setting, and often depend on the hours of the supervising physician.

The workweek of hospital-based PAs may include weekends, nights, or early morning hospital rounds to visit patients. These workers also may be on call. PAs in clinics usually work a 40-hour week.



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## Earnings

Median annual earnings of physician assistants is about \$74,980. The middle 50 percent earned between \$62,430 and \$89,220. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$43,100, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$102,230. Median annual earnings of physician assistants were \$76,710 in general medical and surgical hospitals, \$80,960 in outpatient care centers, and \$74,160 in offices of physicians.



According to the American Academy of Physician Assistants, median income for physician assistants in full-time clinical practice is \$80,356; median income for first-year graduates is \$69,517. Income varies by specialty, practice setting, geographical location, and years of experience. Employers often pay for their employees' liability insurance, registration fees with the Drug Enforcement Administration, State licensing fees, and credentialing fees.

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## Employment

Physician assistants held about 66,000 jobs in the U.S. The number of jobs is greater than the number of practicing PAs because some hold two or more jobs. For example, some PAs work with a supervising physician, but also work in another practice, clinic, or hospital. According to the American Academy of Physician Assistants, about 15 percent of actively practicing PAs worked in more than one clinical job concurrently.

More than half of jobs for PAs were in the offices of physicians. About a quarter were in hospitals, public or private. The rest were mostly in outpatient care centers, including health maintenance organizations; the Federal Government; and public or private colleges, universities, and professional schools. A few were self-employed.



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## Career Path Forecast

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment of physician assistants is expected to grow much faster than the average as health care establishments increasingly use physician assistants to contain costs. Job opportunities for PAs should be good, particularly in rural and inner city clinics, as these settings typically have difficulty attracting physicians.



Employment of physician assistants is expected to grow 27 percent from 2006 to 2016, much faster than the average for all occupations. Projected rapid job growth reflects the expansion of health care industries and an emphasis on cost containment, which results in increasing use of PAs by health care establishments.

Physicians and institutions are expected to employ more PAs to provide primary care and to assist with medical and surgical procedures because PAs are cost-effective and productive members of the health care team. Physician assistants can relieve physicians of routine duties and procedures. Telemedicine -- using technology to facilitate interactive consultations between physicians and physician assistants -- also will expand the use of physician assistants.

Besides working in traditional office-based settings, PAs should find a growing number of jobs in institutional settings such as hospitals, academic medical centers, public clinics, and prisons. PAs also may be needed to augment medical staffing in inpatient teaching hospital settings as the number of hours physician residents are permitted to work is reduced, encouraging hospitals to use PAs to supply some physician resident services.



Job opportunities for PAs should be good, particularly in rural and inner-city clinics because those settings have difficulty attracting physicians. In addition to job openings from employment growth, openings will result from the need to replace physician assistants who retire or leave the occupation permanently during the 2006-16 decade. Opportunities will be best in States that allow PAs a wider scope of practice, such as allowing PAs to prescribe medications.

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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 physician assistants. A broader list of professional associations is also available at [www.careercornerstone.org](http://www.careercornerstone.org).



### -- **American Academy of Physician Assistants** ([www.aapa.org](http://www.aapa.org))

The mission of the American Academy of Physician Assistants is to promote quality, cost-effective, accessible health care, and to promote the professional and personal development of physician assistants.

### -- **National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants** ([www.nccpa.net](http://www.nccpa.net))

NCCPA is the only credentialing organization for physician assistants in the United States. Established as a not-for-profit organization in 1975, NCCPA is dedicated to assuring the public that certified physician assistants meet established standards of knowledge and clinical skills upon entry into practice and throughout their careers.