

EXPLORING: PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT

Overview

Physician Assistants, also known as PAs, practice medicine under the direction and supervision of physicians. They are formally trained to examine patients, diagnose injuries and illnesses, and provide treatment.

Typical Duties:

- ▶ Review patients' medical histories
- ▶ Conduct physical exams to check patients' health
- ▶ Order and interpret diagnostic tests, such as X-rays or blood tests
- ▶ Make preliminary diagnoses concerning a patient's injury or illness
- ▶ Provide treatment, such as setting broken bones and giving immunizations
- ▶ Counsel patients and their families
- ▶ Prescribe medicine

Key Information

- In 2021, the median salary was \$121,530 and employment is expected to grow 28% by 2031.
- Physician Assistants work in all areas of medicine, including primary care and family medicine, emergency medicine, and psychiatry. PAs' work largely depends on their specialty and what their supervising physician needs them to do. For example, a PA working in surgery may close incisions and provide care before and after the operation. A PA working in pediatrics may examine a child or give routine vaccinations.
- The typical employers of PAs are offices of physicians, hospitals, outpatient care centers, government, colleges and professional schools.
- PAs often spend much of their day on their feet, making rounds and evaluating patients. In hospitals, PAs may work nights, weekends, or holidays.
- They may also be on call, meaning that they must be ready to respond to a work request with little notice.

Education Programs

PA programs usually take 2-3 years of full-time study. Most accredited programs offer a Master's degree in Physician Assistant Studies, include classroom instruction and around 2,000 hours of clinical rotations. All states require PAs to be licensed, which means candidates must pass the Physician Assistant National Certifying Examination (PANCE) from the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA). Once licensed and certified, PAs must continue completing 100 hours of additional education every 2 years and reexamination every 10 years. [View a list of accredited PA programs](#) on the PA Education Association's website.

Admission Requirements: Knowledge & Strategies

Application deadlines vary widely by program. First visit CASPA and each program website directly to identify the deadlines for programs that interest you. Work with your faculty advisor to plan for prerequisite requirements. Start early and consult each institution's individual website for specific requirements! PA prerequisites vary widely, so early planning is key.

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Typical Prerequisites May Include:

- ▶ Biological Sciences—including General, Anatomy, Physiology, and Microbiology.
- ▶ Biochemistry
- ▶ Chemistry—typically including Organic Chemistry
- ▶ Psychology
- ▶ Statistics

Prepare for and take the Graduate Records Exam (GRE) or PA-CAT

- ▶ It is recommended that you take the test at least one year before you want to pursue a PA graduate program. Most of those who take the GRE do so after their third year of college. [Learn more about the GRE](#) on ETS's website.
- ▶ GRE content includes:
 - ▷ Verbal Reasoning — ability to analyze and evaluate written material and synthesize information
 - ▷ Quantitative Reasoning —basic concepts of arithmetic, algebra, geometry and data analysis
 - ▷ Analytical Writing — critical thinking and analytical writing skills
- ▶ A new test has been piloted by select PA programs starting with the 2020 application cycle, called the Physician Assistant College Admission Test (PA-CAT). Check your programs of interest to see if any are moving to using the PA-CAT in place of the GRE.

General Advice

- When you submit an application, remember you will do so through a centralized application site: Central Application Service for Physician Assistants ([CASPA](#)).
- Build relationships: create a strong network of pre-health advisors, faculty, peers and professionals. Such connections can open opportunities and letters of recommendation will be required to apply.
- Typically, three letters of recommendation are necessary. Ideally, at least one should be from a professor and one from a practicing licensed physician or Physician Assistant.
- Many PA schools require a minimum number of direct patient care hours, ranging from 40-4,000 documented hours. Gaining these experiences will mean exploring opportunities and tracking hours in an organized manner.
- What qualifies as direct patient care may also vary from school to school (example: some PA programs accept shadowing hours for this requirement, others do not). Common options for obtaining such hours include:
 - Emergency Medical Technician (EMT)
 - Medic or medical corpsman
 - Lab assistant/Phlebotomist
 - Emergency room technician/Surgical tech
 - State Tested Nursing Assistant (STNA)
- Plan financially: there is a cost associated with taking the GRE and applying to schools

Want more information?

Schedule an appointment through [Handshake](#) to meet with a career coach, learn more and create plans to meet your goals!