A Career as a Physician Assistant

Some Major Career Points:

- Requirements for admission to training programs vary; most applicants have a college degree and some health related work experience.
- Physician Assistants must complete an accredited education program and pass a national exam in order to obtain a license.
- Employment is projected to grow must faster than the average for all occupations.
- Job opportunities should be good, particularly in rural and inner-city healthcare facilities.

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 healthcare services, as delegated by a physician. Working as members of a healthcare 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. Physician assistants also may prescribe certain medications. In some establishments, a PA is responsible for managerial duties, such as ordering medical supplies or equipment and supervising medical 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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Work environment. Although PAs usually work in comfortable, well-lighted environment, those in surgery often stand for long periods. At times, the job requires a considerable amount of walking.

Physician assistants held about 74,800 jobs in 2008. 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 healthcare facility. According to the American Academy of Physician Assistants, about 15 percent of actively practicing PAs worked in more than one clinical job concurrently in 2008.

More than 53 percent of jobs for PAs were in the offices of physicians. About 24 percent were in general medical and surgical hospitals, public or private. The rest were mostly in outpatient care centers, including healthcare maintenance organizations; the Federal Government; and public or private colleges, universities, and professional schools. Very few were self-employed.

The median annual wage of physician assistants was $81,230 in May 2008. The middle 50 percent of physician assistants earned between $68,210 and $97,070. The lowest 10 percent earned less than $51,360, and the highest 10 percent earned more than $110,240.

For more information on a career as a physician assistant, log on to the following sources:

American Academy of Physician Assistant Information Center  [www.aapa.org](http://www.aapa.org)


National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants, Inc.  [www.nccpa.net](http://www.nccpa.net)

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Information for this newsletter taken from the U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2010-2011 Edition