

General Surgeon

Thirteen years of training to become the person who opens someone up and fixes the problem.

TYPICAL PAY

\$414,010

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$78k to \$480k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

13 to 15 years

after high school

DEMAND

Moderate

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

Yes

regulated job

WHERE YOU WORK

Hospital operating rooms, trauma centers, surgery centers, clinics

How you get there

- 1 High school** Grades 11 and 12
Top grades in biology, chemistry, physics and math. Nothing here decides your future, but weak science makes the next step harder.
- 2 Bachelor's degree** 4 years
Any major works as long as you finish the pre-medical science courses and hold a high GPA. Sit the MCAT (Medical College Admission Test) in your third year.
- 3 Medical school** 4 years
Two years of classroom science, then two years of hospital rotations. You graduate as an MD (Doctor of Medicine) or a DO (Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine). Both can become surgeons.
- 4 General surgery residency** 5 years
Matched through the NRMP (National Resident Matching Program). Five years of operating, night call and logged cases.
- 5 Board certification** After residency
Two exams from the American Board of Surgery: a written qualifying exam, then an oral certifying exam.

Pros and cons

- + You fix a problem with your hands and see the result the same day
- + Among the highest paid work in the country
- + Every hospital needs you, including in small towns
- Thirteen years and six figures of debt before full pay
- Nights, weekends and call that wreck your sleep
- Patients die on your table and you carry that

Good to know

The 80-hour week is a cap, not a goal

Residency programs accredited by the ACGME (Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education) may not schedule a resident for more than 80 hours a week, averaged over four weeks. The limit grew...

An algorithm decides where you train

The NRMP (National Resident Matching Program) places graduating students into residency using a matching algorithm. The research behind it won the 2012 Nobel Prize in economic sciences. You rank pr...

Optional boosts

Trauma and surgical critical care. Vascular surgery. Surgical oncology. Minimally invasive and bariatric surgery.

Where these numbers come from

O*NET OnLine: Surgeons, All Other (29-1249.00)
American Board of Surgery: getting certified in general surgery
United States Medical Licensing Examination
National Resident Matching Program

Numbers checked September 2026. Pay figures are typical full-time annual amounts in United States dollars, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics wage data and published pay scales. They vary by state, employer and experience. Tuition is for in-state students at public schools unless the card says otherwise. Sources, links and the click-through version: <https://career.help/us/careers/general-surgeon>



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