

Hairstylist

Cut, color and style hair for a living. Licensed in every state, and the people who do well build a book of regulars they keep for years.

TYPICAL PAY

\$35,790

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$27k to \$71k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

1 to 2 years

after high school

DEMAND

Good

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

Yes

regulated job

WHERE YOU WORK

Salons, barbershops, rented chairs, spas, film and television sets

How you get there

- 1 High school diploma** Grade 12
 Almost every state requires a diploma or an equivalency certificate to sit the licensing exam. A few states let you start the program before you finish.
- 2 Cosmetology school** 9 to 15 months
 A set number of training hours fixed by your state, done at a private beauty school or a community college. Full-time programs usually run about 9 to 15 months.
- 3 Pass the state board exam** Weeks
 A written theory test and, in many states, a hands-on practical test on a mannequin. Sanitation and safety are a big chunk of it.
- 4 Get licensed and find a chair** Weeks
 Apply to your state board with your hours and your exam results. Then find a salon that will take a new stylist.
- 5 Build a book** 3 to 5 years
 Assistant, then junior stylist, then your own column of regulars. Three to five years before the money is good.

Pros and cons

- + Licensed and working in about a year, with no degree
- + Portable: people need haircuts in every town in the country
- + You can run your own business from a rented chair with almost no capital
- The pay is low for years, and the median is below \$36,000
- Standing, arms raised, all day. Wrists, shoulders and backs wear out
- Weekends and evenings are the job, not the exception

Optional boosts

Color. Textured and curly hair. Extensions. Barbering license.

Good to know

The same career, different lengths

Training hours are set state by state, not nationally. Depending on where you live, the identical cosmetology license can take around 1,000 hours or more than 1,500. Move across a state line and your lic...

Sanitation is most of the exam

New stylists expect the licensing test to be about cutting. A large share of it is disinfection, blood spill procedure and skin conditions. State boards license this trade because sharp tools plus chemicals p...

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Hairdressers, Hairstylists, and Cosmetologists (39-5012.00)
 National Interstate Council of State Boards of Cosmetology
 California Board of Barbering and Cosmetology: applicants
 Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation: barbering and cosmetology licenses

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/hairstylist>



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