

Physician Assistant

Examine patients, order tests and write prescriptions, after about seven years instead of a doctor's eleven.

TYPICAL PAY

\$135,880

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$99k to \$190k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

6 to 8 years

after high school

DEMAND

Very high

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

Yes

regulated job

WHERE YOU WORK

**Hospitals, primary care clinics,
emergency departments, surgical...**

How you get there

- 1 High school** Grades 11 and 12
 Biology, chemistry and math. Get a job or volunteer post that puts you near patients as early as you can.
- 2 Bachelor's degree** 4 years
 Any major is allowed as long as you finish the science prerequisites: anatomy, physiology, microbiology, chemistry and statistics. Keep your GPA high, because admissions is numbers-first.
- 3 Patient care hours** 1 to 2 years, often overlapping
 Most programs want 1,000 to 2,000 hours of hands-on work first. People get them as a medical assistant, an emergency medical technician, a paramedic or a nursing assistant. Some do this during the degree, some take a year after it.
- 4 Physician assistant program** About 2 to 3 years
 About 27 months, ending in a master's degree. One year of classroom science, then rotations through family medicine, surgery, emergency, psychiatry, pediatrics and obstetrics. Apply through CASPA (Centralized Application Service for Physician Assistants), which sends one ap...
- 5 Certify and get licensed** A few months
 Pass the national certifying exam, then apply to the medical board in the state where you want to work.

Pros and cons

- + Practicing medicine about four years sooner than a doctor
- + Six figures from your first job
- + Change specialty whenever you like, no new degree
- Two years of graduate school with no income and heavy debt
- You need 1,000 hours or more of patient work before you can even apply
- A doctor signs off on your scope, and the rules differ in every state

Optional boosts

Surgery. Emergency medicine. Dermatology. Psychiatry.

Good to know

The job was invented for returning medics

Duke University started the first program in the mid 1960s and filled the first class with Navy corpsmen coming home from military service. They had years of real medical experience and no civilian credential t...

The exam is five hours in five blocks

The PANCE (Physician Assistant National Certifying Examination) is five blocks of 60 questions, 60 minutes each, sat at a testing center. Pass it and you earn the protected title Physician Assistant-Certified...

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Physician Assistants, wages and tasks
 National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants: getting certified
 Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant
 PA Education Association: the centralized application service

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/physician-assistant>



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