

Thoracic Surgeon

Operate inside the chest: lungs, esophagus, airway and chest wall. One of the longest trainings in medicine.

TYPICAL PAY

\$414,010

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$78k to \$720k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

14 to 16 years

after high school

DEMAND

Moderate

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

Yes

regulated job

WHERE YOU WORK

Hospital operating rooms, intensive care units, outpatient clinics, on c...

How you get there

- 1 Bachelor's degree** 4 years
 Any major, but you must complete the science prerequisites: biology, chemistry, organic chemistry, physics and math.
- 2 The MCAT (medical school admission test) and applications** A year of preparation and applying
 Run by the Association of American Medical Colleges, which also runs the shared application service. About 95,000 people sit the test each year.
- 3 Medical school** 4 years
 Two years of science, two years of clinical rotations. You take the first two steps of the United States Medical Licensing Examination along the way.
- 4 Surgical training** 6 to 8 years
 Either a general surgery residency followed by a thoracic surgery fellowship, or an integrated thoracic surgery residency entered straight from medical school. Programs are accredited by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education.
- 5 Board certification** After training
 The American Board of Thoracic Surgery runs a written examination and then an oral examination, held in Dallas, Texas, before it will certify you.

Pros and cons

- + Among the highest paid careers in the country
- + The operations genuinely extend lives, often by years
- + Technically demanding work that stays interesting for a whole career
- Fourteen to sixteen years before you are fully qualified
- Six figure debt carried through most of your twenties
- Long operations, night call and a high rate of burnout across the specialty

Optional boosts

Lung transplantation. Esophageal surgery. Robotic surgery. Research years.

Where these numbers come from

O*NET OnLine: Surgeons, All Other (29-1249.00)
 American Board of Thoracic Surgery
 Doximity physician compensation report, 2024
 United States Medical Licensing Examination

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/thoracic-surgeon>

Good to know

The pay figure has to be estimated

The federal wage survey does not publish a separate line for thoracic surgeons. They are folded into Surgeons, All Other, and for years the top of that group was not published at all because the numbers were...

There is an oral exam, and you travel for it

The American Board of Thoracic Surgery certifies in two parts: a written examination and then an oral examination held in Dallas, Texas, where you are questioned on real cases in front of examiners.



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