

## **PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT**

### **What does a physician assistant do?**

A physician assistant (PA) is a licensed medical professional who holds an advanced degree and is able to provide direct patient care. They work with patients of all ages in virtually all specialty and primary care areas, diagnosing and treating common illnesses and working with minor procedures.

With an increasing shortage of health care providers, PAs are a critical part of today's team-based approach to health care. They increase access to quality health care for many populations and communities.

### **Scope of practice**

The specific duties of a PA are determined by their supervising physician and state law, but they provide many of the same services as a primary care physician. They practice in every state and in a wide variety of clinical settings and specialties.

### **On a typical day, the roles and responsibilities of a PA include:**

- Making rounds and performing patient exams
- Diagnosing illnesses
- Assisting in surgery
- Ordering and interpreting laboratory tests and X-rays
- Prescribing medications
- Developing and managing treatment plans
- Advising patients on preventative care and optimal health practices

While PAs work in collaboration with a supervising physician, this does not mean they work under direct supervision of a physician. Most work independently, operating under a set scope of practice determined by state law. For example, each state has rules and regulations regarding which types of medication a PA can prescribe. Anything outside of that list requires additional consulting from a physician.

### **Physician assistant vs. nurse practitioner**

Many times, the role of a PA gets confused with the role of a nurse practitioner. While they serve a similar role, their training and specialization options are very different.

A PA is educated in general medicine and trained using a disease-centered curriculum model similar to that of a medical student. They also have the ability to specialize in a variety of areas after they get their degree.

Nurse practitioners on the other hand are educated as an advanced nursing role, following a patient-centered model of education and practice. They also typically select a primary specialty before beginning their graduate program and subsequently work with that specific patient population.

### **Specializations**

Because PAs have the opportunity to excel in virtually any specialty area of medicine, types of physician assistants span a variety of roles, specialties, and sub-specialty areas. PAs have the ability to specialize in one or several areas throughout their career. This versatility is a main advantage of the PA role.

In order to specialize in a particular area, advanced training is often required. Typically PAs will be required to complete a fellowship or residency in order to practice in a specialty or sub-specialty area. Additional training requirements, certifications, roles, responsibilities, and things such as pay do vary between specialty areas.

## Work environment

PAs are commonly employed at hospitals, physicians' offices, outpatient centers, and nursing homes. They spend a majority of their time on their feet making rounds and working with patients. They are also responsible for administrative duties such as updating patient records, taking notes, and communicating with patients online.

The typical PA works full time, 40 hours per week. This role may often times require additional hours. Their shifts vary, and they may be required to work nights, weekends, or holidays. This role is also usually required to be on call occasionally.

