

PHYSICIANS AND SURGEONS

What Physicians and Surgeons Do

Physicians and surgeons diagnose and treat injuries or illnesses and address health maintenance. Physicians examine patients; take medical histories; prescribe medications; and order, perform, and interpret diagnostic tests. They often counsel patients on diet, hygiene, and preventive healthcare. Surgeons operate on patients to treat injuries, such as broken bones; diseases, such as cancerous tumors; and deformities, such as cleft palates. There are two types of physicians, with similar degrees: M.D. (Medical Doctor) and D.O. (Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine). Both use the same methods of treatment, including drugs and surgery, but D.O.s place additional emphasis on the body's musculoskeletal system, preventive medicine, and holistic (whole-person) patient care. D.O.s are most likely to be primary care physicians, although they work in all specialties.

Duties

Physicians and surgeons typically do the following:

- Take a patient's medical history and perform a physical exam
- Document and update charts and patient information to show findings and treatments
- Order tests and consultations for other physicians or healthcare staff to perform
- Review test results to identify abnormal findings
- Recommend, design, and implement a treatment plan
- Address concerns or answer questions that patients have about their health and well-being
- Help patients take care of their health by discussing topics such as proper nutrition and hygiene

Specializations

Physicians and surgeons focus on a particular type of practice. Within their area of focus, they also may specialize or subspecialize.

Cardiologists diagnose and treat diseases or conditions of the heart and blood vessels, such as valve problems, high blood pressure, and heart attacks. Cardiologists may work with adults or specialize in pediatrics (typically newborns through age 21). Although they treat many of the same disorders in either population, cardiologists in pediatric care focus on conditions that patients are born with rather than on those that develop later in life.

Dermatologists provide care for diseases relating to the skin, hair, and nails. They treat patients who may have melanoma or other skin cancers. They may offer both medical and surgical dermatology services.

Emergency medicine physicians treat patients in urgent medical situations. These physicians evaluate, care for, and stabilize patients whose illness or injury requires immediate attention. Unlike many other physicians, who often choose to specialize, most emergency medical physicians are generalists.

Family medicine physicians are generalists who address health maintenance and assess and treat conditions that occur in everyday life. These conditions include sinus and respiratory infections, intestinal ailments, and broken bones. Family medicine physicians typically have regular, long-term patients, who may include all members of the same household.

General internal medicine physicians diagnose and provide nonsurgical treatment for a range of problems that affect internal organs and systems such as the stomach, kidneys, liver, and digestive tract. Internists use a variety of diagnostic techniques to treat patients through medication or hospitalization. Their patients are mostly adults. They may specialize, such as in gastroenterology or endocrinology.

Obstetricians and gynecologists (OB/GYNs) provide care and counsel to women regarding pregnancy, childbirth, and the female reproductive system. They also diagnose and treat health issues specific to women, such as cervical cancer, ovarian cysts, and symptoms related to menopause.

Orthopedic surgeons diagnose and treat conditions of or injuries to the musculoskeletal system, which includes bones, muscles, ligaments, and tendons. They may specialize in certain areas of the body, such as the foot and ankle, or in a particular type of practice, such as sports medicine.

Pediatricians provide care for infants, children, teenagers, and young adults. They specialize in diagnosing and treating problems specific to younger people. Most pediatricians administer vaccinations and treat common illnesses, minor injuries, and infectious diseases. Some pediatricians specialize in serious medical conditions that commonly affect younger patients, such as autoimmune disorders.

Psychiatrists are primary mental health physicians. They diagnose and treat mental illnesses through a combination of personal counseling (psychotherapy), psychoanalysis, hospitalization, and medication. Psychotherapy involves psychiatrists helping their clients change behavioral patterns and explore past experiences. Psychoanalysis involves long-term psychotherapy and counseling. Psychiatrists may prescribe medications to correct chemical imbalances that cause some mental illnesses.

Work environment

Physicians and surgeons work in both clinical and nonclinical settings. Some examples of clinical settings are physicians' offices and hospitals, including academic hospitals associated with residency programs or schools of medicine. Nonclinical settings include government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and insurance companies. In clinical settings, physicians may work as part of a group practice or healthcare organization. These arrangements allow them to coordinate patient care but give them less independence than solo practitioners have.

Physicians and surgeons may stand for long periods throughout the day. Other working conditions may vary by specialty. For example, surgeons and anesthesiologists usually work in a sterile environment and must follow protocol to maintain it during procedures.



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