

# Q & A about Physician Assistants

## The most commonly asked questions about PAs

Q. What is a physician assistant?

A. A physician assistant is a health professional licensed by the state or credentialed by a federal employer to practice medicine as delegated by and with the supervision of a physician. PAs provide a broad range of medical and surgical services that traditionally have been performed by physicians.

The PA works as a member of a team with his or her supervising physician as the leader of the team. PAs can meet the needs of patients in a variety of clinical settings.

Q. What does a physician assistant do?

A. As part of their comprehensive responsibilities, physician assistants perform physical exams, diagnose illnesses, develop and carry out treatment plans, order and interpret labs tests, suture lacerations, apply casts, assist in surgery, provide patient educations and preventative health care counseling, and prescribe medications.

Q. What kind of conditions can PAs treat and what situations require the doctor's care?

A. What a PA does corresponds to the supervising physician's practice. The cases handled by physicians are generally more complicated medical cases or those that require care that is not a routine part of the PA's scope of work.

Supervising physicians determine which patients and what kind of illnesses they want the PA to treat. Close consultation between a patient, PA, and physician is done for unusual or hard-to-manage illnesses.

Q. How does one become a PA?

A. All PAs must first graduate from a nationally accredited physician assistant program, then pass a national certification exam and be licensed by the state. Usually a PA has a bachelor's degree and three to four years of health care experience.

A PA's education doesn't stop after graduation, though. To be knowledgeable about new medical advances, PAs are committed to lifelong learning. PAs take continuing medical education classes throughout their careers and sit for a national recertification exam every six years.

Q. What's the difference between a PA and a physician?

A. A major difference between PA education and physician education is the amount of time spent in their formal education. In addition, physicians are required to do an internship after graduation from medical school, and the majority of physicians complete a residency in a specialty following their internship. PAs are not required to undertake an internship or residency.

Q. What does the "C" in PA-C mean?

A. Physician assistant-certified. It means that the person who holds the title has passed the certification exam developed jointly by the National Board of Medical Examiners and the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NNCPA) and is currently certified by the commission.

To maintain the “C” after PA, a physician assistant must log 100 hours of continuing medical education every two years and take the national recertification exam every six years.

AAPA - American Academy of Physician Assistants [www.aapa.org](http://www.aapa.org)