

Medical Assisting Career

Job prospects should be best for medical assistants with formal training or experience.

Medical assisting continues to be one of the fastest growing occupations.

Nature of Work

Medical assistants perform routine administrative and clinical tasks to keep the offices and clinics of physicians, podiatrists, chiropractors, and optometrists running smoothly. They should not be confused with physician assistants who examine, diagnose, and treat patients under the direct supervision of a physician.

The duties of medical assistants vary from office to office, depending on office location, size, and specialty. In small practices, medical assistants are usually “generalists,” handling both administrative and clinical duties and reporting directly to an office manager, physician, or other health practitioner. Those in large practices tend to specialize in a particular area under the supervision of department administrators.

Medical assistants perform many administrative duties. They answer telephones, greet patients, update and file patient medical records, fill out insurance forms, handle correspondence, schedule appointments, arrange for hospital admission and laboratory services, and handle billing and book-keeping.

Clinical duties vary according to state law and include taking medical histories and recording vital signs, explaining treatment procedures to patients, preparing patients for examination, and assisting the physician during the examination. Medical assistants collect and prepare laboratory specimens or perform basic laboratory tests on the premises, dispose of contaminated supplies, and sterilize medical instruments. They instruct patients about medication and special diets, prepare and administer medications as directed by a physician, authorize drug refills as directed, telephone prescriptions to a pharmacy, draw blood, prepare patients for x-rays, take electrocardiograms, remove sutures, and change dressings.

Medical assistants may also arrange examining room instruments and equipment, purchase and maintain supplies and equipment, and keep waiting and examining rooms neat and clean.

Assistants who specialize have additional duties. Podiatric medical assistants make castings of feet, expose and develop x rays, and assist podiatrists in surgery. Ophthalmic medical assistants help ophthalmologists provide medical eye care. They administer diagnostic tests, measure and record vision, and test eye muscle function. They also show patients how to insert, remove, and care for contact lenses; and they apply eye dressings. Under the direction of the physician, they may administer eye medications. They also maintain optical and surgical instruments and may assist the ophthalmologist in surgery.

Working Conditions

Medical assistants work in well-lighted, clean environments. They constantly interact with other people, and may have to handle several responsibilities at once.

Most full-time medical assistants work a regular 40-hour week. Some work part-time, evenings, or weekends.

Employment

Medical assistants held about 365,000 jobs in 2002. Almost 60 percent were in physicians’ offices, and about 14 percent were in public and private hospitals, including inpatient and outpatient facilities and almost 10 percent worked in offices of other health practitioners, such as chiropractors and podiatrists. The rest worked mostly in outpatient care centers, public and private educational services, other ambulatory healthcare services, State and local government agencies, medical and diagnostic laboratories, nursing care facilities, and employment services.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Most employers prefer to hire graduates of formal programs in medical assisting. Such programs are offered in vocational-technical high schools, postsecondary vocational schools, community and junior colleges, and in colleges and universities. Postsecondary programs usually last either one year, resulting in a certificate or diploma, or two years, resulting in an associate degree.

Courses cover anatomy, physiology, and medical terminology, as well as typing, transcription, recordkeeping, accounting, and insurance processing. Students learn laboratory techniques, clinical and diagnostic procedures, pharmaceutical principles, medication administration, and first aid. They study office practices, patient relations, medical law, and ethics. Accredited programs include an externship that provides practical experience in physicians’ offices, hospitals, or other health care facilities.

Formal training in medical assisting, while generally preferred, is not always required. Some medical assistants are trained on the job, although this is less common than in the past. Applicants usually need a high school diploma or the equivalent. Recommended high school courses include mathematics, health, biology, typing, book-keeping, computers, and office skills. Volunteer experience in the health care field is also helpful.



Two agencies accredit programs in medical assisting: the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs (CAAHEP) and the Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools (ABHES). In 2002, there were about 495 medical assisting programs accredited by CAAHEP and about 170 accredited by ABHES. The Committee on Accreditation for Ophthalmic Medical Personnel accredited 14 programs in ophthalmic medical assisting.

Although there is no licensing for medical assistants, some states require them to take a test or a course before they can perform certain tasks, such as taking x-rays.

Employers prefer to hire experienced workers or certified applicants who have passed a national examination, indicating that the medical assistant meets certain standards of competence. The American Association of Medical Assistants awards the Certified Medical Assistant credential; the American Medical Technologists awards the Registered Medical Assistant credential; the American Society of Podiatric Medical Assistants awards the Podiatric Medical Assistant Certified credential; and the Joint Commission on Allied Health Personnel in Ophthalmology awards the Ophthalmic Medical Assistant credential at three levels: Certified Ophthalmic Assistant, Certified Ophthalmic Technician, and Certified Ophthalmic Medical Technologist.

Medical assistants deal with the public; therefore, they must be neat and well-groomed and have a courteous, pleasant manner. Medical assistants must be able to put patients at ease and explain physicians' instructions. They must respect the confidential nature of medical information. Clinical duties require a reasonable level of manual dexterity and visual acuity.

Medical assistants may be able to advance to office manager. They may qualify for a variety of administrative support occupations, or may teach medical assisting. Some, with additional education, enter other health occupations such as nursing and medical technology.

Job Outlook

Employment of medical assistants is expected to grow much faster than the average for

all occupations as the health services industry expands due to technological advances in medicine, and a growing and aging population. Increasing utilization of medical assistants in the rapidly-growing healthcare industries will result in fast employment growth for the occupation.

Employment growth will be driven by the increase in the number of group practices, clinics, and other health care facilities that need a high proportion of support personnel, particularly the flexible medical assistant who can handle both administrative and clinical duties. Medical assistants primarily work in outpatient settings, where much faster than average growth is expected.

In view of the preference of many health care employers for trained personnel, job prospects should be best for medical assistants with formal training or experience, particularly those with certification.

Earnings

The earnings of medical assistants vary, depending on experience, skill level, and location. Median annual earnings of medical assistants were \$23,940 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$20,260 and \$28,410 a year. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$17,640, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$34,130 a year. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest number of medical assistants in 2002 were as follows:

General medical and surgical hospitals	\$24,460
Offices of physicians	24,260
Outpatient care centers	23,980
Other ambulatory health care services	23,440
Offices of other health practitioners	21,620

Related Occupations

Workers in other medical support occupations include dental assistants, medical records and health information technicians, medical secretaries, occupational therapist assistants and aides, pharmacy aides, and physical therapist assistants and aides.

Additional Information

The American Association of Medical Assistants

20 N. Wacker Dr., Ste. 1575
Chicago, IL 60606
<http://www.aama-ntl.org>

Information about career opportunities, CAAHEP-accredited educational programs in medical assisting, and the Certified Medical Assistant Examination

Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs

35 E. Wacker Dr., Ste. 1970
Chicago, IL 60601
<http://www.caahep.org/caahep>

Registered Medical Assistants of American Medical Technologists

710 Higgins Rd.
Park Ridge, IL 60068-5765
<http://www.amt1.com>

Information about career opportunities and the Registered Medical Assistant certification exam

Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools

803 West Broad St., Ste. 730
Falls Church, VA 22046
<http://www.abhes.org>

For a list of ABHES-accredited educational programs in medical assisting

Joint Commission on Allied Health Personnel in Ophthalmology

2025 Woodlane Dr.
St. Paul, MN 55125-2995.
<http://www.jcahpo.org>

Information about career opportunities, training programs, and the Certified Ophthalmic Assistant exam