



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

A. Physician assistants are trained in medicine, just like physicians, and in some programs PAs attend many of the same classes as medical students. Both professions are educated to detect diseases and treat them, and to assist patients in living healthier lifestyles.

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. Have physician assistants been accepted on the health care team?

A. The American Medical Association, American College of Surgeons, American Academy of Family Physicians, American College of Physicians, and other national medical groups support the physician assistant profession by having voting members on the boards that accredit PA educational programs and certify individual PAs.

PAs enjoy a collegial relationship with other health professionals because physician assistants have demonstrated their commitment to patients and their competence in delivering quality medical care. Their training as team players enables them to work with others to ensure appropriate patient care in all settings.

According to the Eighth Report to the President and Congress on the Status of Health Personnel in the United States: "Physician assistants have demonstrated their clinical effectiveness both in terms of quality of care and patient acceptance."

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 (NCCPA) and is currently certified by the commission. The NCCPA is an independent organization, and its commissioners represent different national medical organizations and the PA profession. Only graduates from an accredited PA educational program are allowed to take the initial exam.

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.

Q. What is the American Academy of Physician Assistants?

A. AAPA is the only national professional society to represent all physician assistants in every area of medicine. Founded in 1968, the Academy represents PAs in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. territories, and the federal services. Its mission is to provide quality, cost-effective, and accessible health care as well as to support the professional and personal development of physician assistants. AAPA pursues these goals through government relations and public education programs, data collection efforts, and continuing medical education activities.



**For more information about the PA profession contact:
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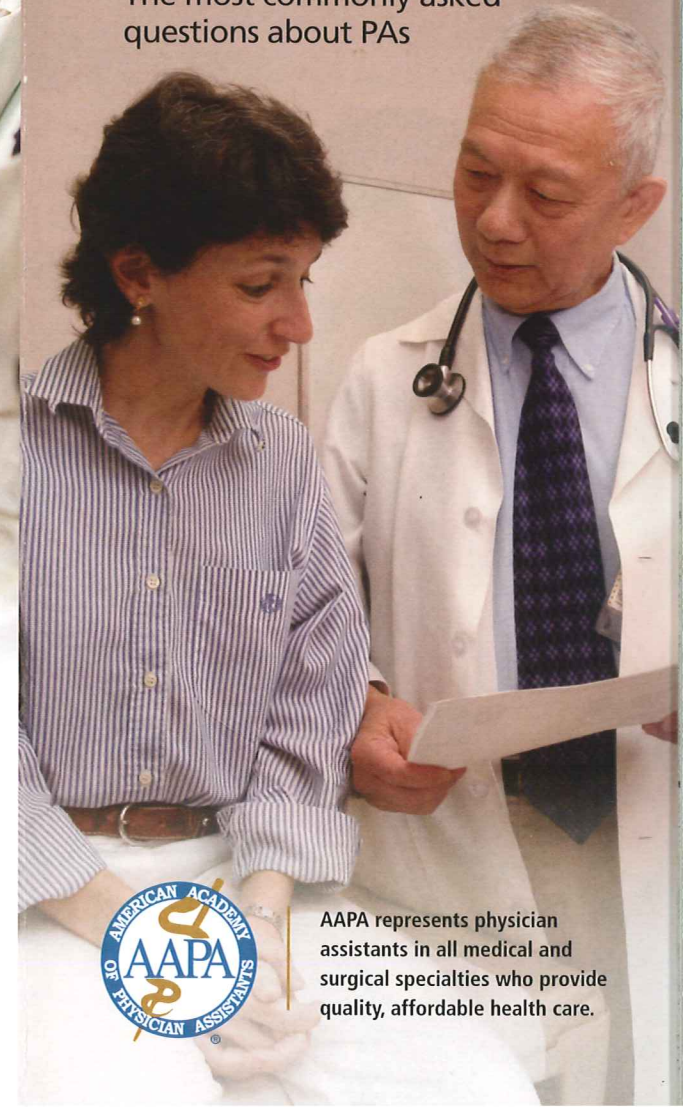
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Pub. #101 Rev. 9/06

Q&A

about
Physician Assistants

The most commonly asked questions about PAs



AAPA represents physician assistants in all medical and surgical specialties who provide quality, affordable health care.

Physician assistants (PAs) have been part of the health care system since the 1960s. This brochure will answer many of the most commonly asked questions about the profession.

If you have any additional questions, contact the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA) at 703/836-2272 or visit AAPA's Web site at www.aapa.org.



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. PAs have long been recognized as quality health care providers.

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 lab tests, suture lacerations, apply casts, assist in surgery, provide patient education and preventive health care counseling, and prescribe medications.

To allow the physician-PA team to be the most efficient in providing care to patients, the vast majority of states do not require PAs and their supervising physicians to be at the same location. All state laws require the supervising physician to be available, either in person or by telecommunications, when the PA is seeing patients.

Q. What kinds 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 the 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 kinds of illnesses they want PAs to treat. Close consultation between the patient, PA, and physician is done for unusual or hard-to-manage illnesses. Physician assistants are

taught to know when it is appropriate to have the patient seen by the physician. It is an important part of PA training.

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. The typical person applying to a PA educational program has a bachelor's degree and three to four years of health care experience. Commonly, nurses, emergency medical technicians, and medical assistants apply to PA programs.

PA programs look for students who have a desire to study, work hard, and to be of service. All PA programs are accredited by one independent organization supported by the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Family Physicians, the American College of Surgeons, and other national medical organizations. Whether located at a college, university, medical school, or teaching hospital, all PA programs must meet the same standards.

Physician assistant students receive a broad medical education in two phases. The first phase includes classroom work and lab sessions in anatomy, physiology, pharmacology, microbiology, medical ethics, and similar courses. The second phase is spent in clinics and hospitals working in such specialties as family medicine, internal medicine, pediatrics, emergency medicine, obstetrics and gynecology, geriatrics, surgery, psychology, and other specialties. During this period, students treat patients in each of the major disciplines of medicine and perform additional course work on campus.

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. Where do physician assistants work?

A. PAs are employed in virtually all types of health care settings — hospitals, clinics, private physician offices, schools, HMOs, and even in the White House as members of the medical team taking care of the President and Vice President. The U.S. government employs PAs in the military, Veterans Administration, Bureau of Prisons, Public Health Service, and other agencies.

PAs can be found in communities of all size, from the smallest rural town to major metropolitan areas, and in virtually every medical and surgical specialty. Although most PAs work in primary care medicine — that is family medicine, internal medicine, pediatrics, and obstetrics and gynecology — many work in specialty medicine, such as cardiothoracic surgery and orthopedics. PAs may also work in the areas of medical education, health administration, and research.