

---

# Medical Assistants

---

(O\*NET 31-9092.00)

---

## Significant Points

- About 62 percent of medical assistants work in offices of physicians.
- Some medical assistants are trained on the job, but many complete 1-year or 2-year programs.
- Employment is projected to grow much faster than average, ranking medical assistants among the fastest growing occupations over the 2006-16 decade.
- Job prospects should be excellent.

## Nature of the Work

Medical assistants perform administrative and clinical tasks to keep the offices of physicians, podiatrists, chiropractors, and other health practitioners running smoothly. They should not be confused with physician assistants, who examine, diagnose, and treat patients under the direct supervision of a physician. (Physician assistants are discussed elsewhere in the *Handbook*.)

The duties of medical assistants vary from office to office, depending on the location and size of the practice and the practitioner's specialty. In small practices, medical assistants usually do many different kinds of tasks, 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 who perform administrative tasks have many duties. They update and file patients' medical records, fill out insurance forms, and arrange for hospital admissions and laboratory services. They also perform tasks less specific to medical settings, such as answering telephones, greeting patients, handling correspondence, scheduling appointments, and handling billing and bookkeeping.

For clinical medical assistants, duties vary according to what is allowed by State law. Some common tasks include taking medical histories and recording vital signs, explaining treatment procedures to patients, preparing patients for examinations, and assisting physicians during examinations. Medical assistants collect and prepare laboratory specimens and sometimes perform basic laboratory tests on the premises, dispose of contaminated supplies, and sterilize medical instruments. They might instruct patients about medications 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 also may arrange examining room instruments and equipment, purchase and maintain supplies and equipment, and keep waiting and examining rooms neat and clean.

*Ophthalmic medical assistants, optometric assistants, and podiatric medical assistants* are examples of specialized assistants who have additional duties. Ophthalmic medical as-

sistants help ophthalmologists provide eye care. They conduct 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, ophthalmic medical assistants may administer eye medications. They also maintain optical and surgical instruments and may assist the ophthalmologist in surgery. Optometric assistants also help provide eye care, working with optometrists. They provide chair-side assistance, instruct patients about contact lens use and care, conduct preliminary tests on patients, and otherwise provide assistance while working directly with an optometrist. Podiatric medical assistants make castings of feet, expose and develop x-rays, and assist podiatrists in surgery.

**Work environment.** 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. However, many medical assistants work part time, evenings, or weekends.

## Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Some medical assistants are trained on the job, but many complete 1-year or 2-year programs.

**Education and training.** Postsecondary medical assisting programs are offered in vocational-technical high schools, postsecondary vocational schools, and community and junior colleges. Programs usually last either 1 year and result in a certificate or diploma, or 2 years and result 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, the administration of medications, and first aid. They study office practices, patient relations, medical law, and ethics. There are various organizations that accredit medical assisting programs. Accredited programs often include an internship 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 practice is less common than in the past. Applicants usually need a high school diploma or the equivalent. Recommended high school courses include math-



*Medical assistants who perform clinical tasks often record vital signs of patients.*

## Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2006	Projected employment, 2016	Change, 2006-16	
				Number	Percent
Medical assistants .....	31-9092	417,000	565,000	148,000	35

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

ematics, health, biology, typing, bookkeeping, computers, and office skills. Volunteer experience in the health care field also is helpful. Medical assistants who are trained on the job usually spend their first few months attending training sessions and working closely with more experienced workers.

Some States allow medical assistants to perform more advanced procedures, such as giving injections, after passing a test or taking a course.

**Certification and other qualifications.** Employers prefer to hire experienced workers or those who are certified. Although not required, certification indicates that a medical assistant meets certain standards of competence. There are various associations—some listed in the sources of information below—that award certification credentials to medical assistants, and the certification process varies. It also is possible to become certified in a specialty, such as podiatry, optometry, or ophthalmology.

Medical assistants deal with the public; therefore, they must be neat and well groomed and have a courteous, pleasant manner and they 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.

**Advancement.** Medical assistants may advance to other occupations through experience or additional training. For example, some may go on to teach medical assisting, and others pursue additional education to become nurses or other health care workers. Administrative medical assistants may advance to office manager, or qualify for a variety of administrative support occupations.

### Employment

Medical assistants held about 417,000 jobs in 2006. About 62 percent worked in offices of physicians; 12 percent worked in public and private hospitals, including inpatient and outpatient facilities; and 11 percent worked in offices of other health practitioners, such as chiropractors, optometrists, and podiatrists. Most of the remainder worked in other health care industries such as outpatient care centers and nursing and residential care facilities.

### Job Outlook

Employment is projected to grow much faster than average, ranking medical assistants among the fastest growing occupations over the 2006-16 decade. Job opportunities should be excellent, particularly for those with formal training or experience, and certification.

**Employment change.** Employment of medical assistants is expected to grow 35 percent from 2006 to 2016, much faster than the average for all occupations. As the health care industry expands because of technological advances in medicine and the growth and aging of the population, there will be an increased

need for all health care workers. Increasing use of medical assistants in the rapidly growing health care industry will further stimulate job growth.

Helping to drive job growth is the increasing number of group practices, clinics, and other health care facilities that need a high proportion of support personnel, particularly medical assistants who can handle both administrative and clinical duties. In addition, medical assistants work primarily in outpatient settings, a rapidly growing sector of the health care industry.

**Job prospects.** Job seekers who want to work as a medical assistant should find excellent job prospects. Medical assistants are projected to account for a very large number of new jobs, and many other opportunities will come from the need to replace workers leaving the occupation. Those with formal training or experience—particularly those with certification—should have the best job opportunities.

### Earnings

The earnings of medical assistants vary, depending on their experience, skill level, and location. Median annual earnings of wage-and-salary medical assistants were \$26,290 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$21,970 and \$31,210. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$18,860, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$36,840. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of medical assistants in May 2006 were:

General medical and surgical hospitals.....	\$27,340
Outpatient care centers.....	26,840
Offices of physicians.....	26,620
Offices of chiropractors.....	22,940
Offices of optometrists.....	22,850

### Related Occupations

Medical assistants perform work similar to the tasks completed by other workers in medical support occupations. Administrative medical assistants do work similar to that of medical secretaries, medical transcriptionists, and medical records and health information technicians. Clinical medical assistants perform duties similar to those of dental assistants; dental hygienists; occupational therapist assistants and aides; pharmacy aides; licensed practical and licensed vocational nurses; surgical technologists; physical therapist assistants and aides; and nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides.

### Sources of Additional Information

Information about career opportunities and certification for medical assistants is available from:

- American Association of Medical Assistants, 20 North Wacker Dr., Suite 1575, Chicago, IL 60606.  
Internet: <http://www.aama-ntl.org>

➤ American Medical Technologists, 10700 West Higgins Rd., Suite 150, Rosemont, IL 60018.

Internet: <http://www.amt1.com>

➤ National Healthcareer Association, 7 Ridgedale Ave., Suite 203, Cedar Knolls, NJ 07927.

Information about career opportunities, training programs, and certification for ophthalmic medical personnel is available from:

➤ Joint Commission on Allied Health Personnel in Ophthalmology, 2025 Woodlane Dr., St. Paul, MN 55125.

Internet: <http://www.jcahpo.org/newsite/index.htm>

Information about career opportunities, training programs and certification for optometric assistants is available from:

➤ American Optometric Association, 243 N. Lindbergh Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63141. Internet: <http://www.aoa.org>

Information about certification for podiatric assistants is available from:

➤ American Society of Podiatric Medical Assistants, 2124 South Austin Blvd., Cicero, IL 60804.

Internet: <http://www.aspma.org>

For lists of accredited educational programs in medical assisting, contact:

➤ Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools, 7777 Leesburg Pike, Suite 314 N, Falls Church, VA 22043.

Internet: <http://www.abhes.org>

➤ Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs, 1361 Park St., Clearwater, FL 33756.

Internet: <http://www.caahep.org>