## Frequently Asked Questions

**Q: What is the difference between a PA and a Physician?**  
Physician Assistants are trained in medicine, just like physicians, and in some programs, PAs attend many of the same classes as medical students. A major difference between PA education and Physician education is not the core content of the curriculum, but the amount of time spent in school. On average, an accredited course of study for a PA takes approximately 108 weeks to complete, compared to 153 weeks for the typical medical school program. Physicians are required to do internship, and the majority also complete a residency in a specialty following the internship. PAs do not have to undertake an internship or residency. One key difference is a physician has complete responsibility for the care of the patient. PAs share that responsibility with physicians. Physicians are independent practitioners. PAs practice medicine with the supervision of physicians.   
  
**Q: What does a Physician Assistant do?**  
Physician Assistants perform physical exams, diagnose illnesses, develop and carry out treatment plans, order and interpret lab tests, suture lacerations, apply casts, assists in surgery, any provide patient education and preventive counseling. A particular PA's responsibilities vary with training, experience, state law, and what is delegated by the supervising physician. In general, PA's can provide approximately 80% of the services typically provided in a primary care practice. To allow the PA/physician team to be more efficient in extending care to patients, most states do not require PAs and their supervising physicians to be at the same location. All state laws require the supervising physician to be immediately available for consultation, either in person or by telecommunications, when the PA is seeing patients.   
    
**Q: What kinds of conditions can PAs treat, and what situations require physician care?**  
The scope of the PA's practice corresponds to the supervising physician's practice. In general, a physician assistant will see many of the same types of patients as the physician. The cases handles by physicians are generally the more complicated cases or those cases which require care that is not a routine part of the PA's scope of work. Referral to the physician, or close consultation between the patient, PA, and physician, is done for unusual or hard-to-manage cases. Physician Assistants are taught to know when it is appropriate to refer to physicians. It is an important of PA training.   
    
**Q: Can PAs prescribe medications?**  
Forty-six states, the District of Columbia, and Guam have enacted laws that authorize PA prescribing. PAs in Arkansas and Illinois have statutory authority to prescribe and will be able to write prescriptions as soon as rules are adopted. (Arkansas and Illinois are included in the 46 states.). In California, PA prescriptions are referred to as written prescription transmittal orders.   
    
**Q: What areas of medicine can Physician Assistants work in?**  
Physician assistants (PAs) are found in all areas of medicine. Today, over 50 percent of all physician assistants practice what is known as "primary care medicine" - that is family medicine, internal medicine, pediatrics, and obstetrics and gynecology. About 19 percent are in surgery or the surgical subspecialties.   
  
**﻿Q: How did the Physician Assistant profession begin?**  
In the mid-1960s, physicians and educators recognized there was a shortage and uneven distribution of primary care physicians. To expand the delivery of quality medical care, Dr. Eugene Stead of the Duke University Medical Center in North Carolina put together the first class of PAs in 1965. He selected Navy corpsmen who received considerable medical training during their military service and during the war in Vietnam but who had no comparable civilian employment. He based the curriculum of the PA program in part on his knowledge of the fast-track training of doctors during World War II.