

Understanding the Differences: MD, DO, PA, NP



In healthcare, understanding the roles and qualifications of different medical professionals is crucial for both patients and practitioners.

This document outlines the key differences between four main types of healthcare providers:

- Doctor of Medicine (MD)
- Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine (DO)
- Physician Assistant (PA)
- Nurse Practitioner (NP)

Understanding these differences helps ensure that patients receive appropriate and effective care based on their individual needs.

Who should I see?

There is no one type of provider that is the best option for your care 100% of the time. In the table below you will see that all provider types are able to provide comprehensive care for patients. The differences lie in the provider's educational course and how the clinic or specialty utilizes the different care team members.

Clinics have different ways of assigning patients to providers. Here are some examples clinics may choose:

- There may be no difference in the type of patients a PA or NP sees compared to an MD or DO.
- Some providers may have restrictions on diagnoses or ages of patients they see.
- All new patients first see an NP or PA and then see an MD/DO in follow up.
- All new patients first see a MD/DO and then transfer follow up care to PA/NPs.

It can be helpful to understand how a clinic schedules new patients and your opportunity to change between providers if they are not the right fit. You can talk to the scheduler at the clinic to help you understand the right provider type for you.

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Summary of Differences

	MD	DO	PA	NP
Can diagnose disease	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Can prescribe medication	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Can order tests	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Can practice medicine independently	Yes	Yes	May require MD/DO supervision	May require MD/DO supervision
Education and experience	Medical School + Residency; Fellowship (not required)	Medical School + Residency; Fellowship (not required)	PA School + on-the-job training	Nursing school + NP school + on-the-job training

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1. MD (Doctor of Medicine)

MDs are medical doctors who hold a Doctor of Medicine degree. They are trained to diagnose and treat a wide range of medical conditions.

Education and Training

- **Education:** MDs complete a bachelor's degree, followed by 4 years of medical school.
- **Clinical Experience:** After medical school, MDs attend residency, where they specialize in a particular field of medicine. This is an additional 3 to 7 years of training. Some MDs will specialize further and attend a 1+ year fellowship training
- **Licensing:** MDs must pass national board exams and obtain state licensure to practice medicine.

Scope of Practice

- MDs focus on the use of medications and surgeries to treat diseases.
- They can specialize in a wide range of fields, including surgery, internal medicine, pediatrics, and more.

2. DO (Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine)

DOs are medical doctors who hold a Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine degree. They receive similar training to MDs, but with an added emphasis on a holistic approach to medicine.

Education and Training

- **Education:** DOs complete a bachelor's degree, followed by 4 years of medical school.
- **Clinical Experience:** After medical school, DOs attend residency, where they specialize in a particular field of medicine. This is an additional 3 to 7 years of training. Some DOs will specialize further and attend a 1+ year fellowship training
- **Licensing:** DOs must pass national board exams and obtain state licensure to practice medicine.

Scope of Practice

- DOs are trained in osteopathic medicine, which includes allopathic techniques plus osteopathic manipulative treatment (OMT). OMT involves using the hands to diagnose, treat, and prevent conditions.
- They can specialize in a wide range of fields, including surgery, internal medicine, pediatrics, and more.

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3. PA (Physician Assistant)

PAs are licensed clinicians who practice medicine in a variety of specialties and settings.

Education and Training

- **Education:** PAs complete a bachelor's degree, followed by 3 years of PA school.
- **Clinical Experience:** PA school includes clinical experiences. They have on-the-job training after graduating from school. They do not attend residency, though some specialized post-school training programs are being developed.
- **Licensing:** PAs must pass the Physician Assistant National Certifying Exam (PANCE) and obtain state licensure.

Scope of Practice

- PAs are trained to perform many of the same functions as MDs and DOs, including taking medical histories, doing physical exams, ordering and interpreting tests, developing treatment plans, and prescribing medications.
- Their practice is overseen by a physician, though the level of supervision can vary by state.

4. NP (Nurse Practitioner)

NPs are advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs) with advanced education and training in the diagnosis and treatment of medical conditions.

Education and Training

- **Education:** NPs first work as registered nurses (RNs). They then go back to school for a master's or doctoral degree in nursing (which takes 2-4 years to complete).
- **Clinical Experience:** NPs complete supervised clinical practice hours during NP school. They do not attend residency.
- **Licensing:** NPs must pass a national certification exam in their specialty area and obtain state licensure.

Scope of Practice

- NPs are trained to provide a wide range of healthcare services, including diagnosing and treating illnesses, doing physical exams, ordering and interpreting tests, and prescribing medications.
- They may focus on specific areas such as family practice, pediatrics, mental health, or geriatrics.