

Your Doctor's Education

Medical doctors receive demanding education, training, and testing before they become licensed to practice medicine. Before beginning their medical education they usually have 4 years of college-level education. This is followed by 4 years in medical school. The first part of medical school is focused on classroom and laboratory study in the health sciences (anatomy, biochemistry, microbiology, pathology, pharmacology, and physiology). The second part focuses on working with patients under the supervision of licensed doctors.

After medical school doctors must complete 1 to 3 years of residency training to be eligible to take the examination for their medical license. They must generally pass a national examination to practice medicine in most states. At this point, a doctor has had as much as 11 years of education



and training beyond high school.

Most doctors go on to take specialty training in a residency program, usually based in a hospital. For primary certification this can require from 3 to 8 years. This specialty training is followed by more examinations in order for the doctor to become certified by a specialty board. If your doctor is board certified, he or she has probably had about 12 to 15 years of education beyond high school.

After specialty training, some doctors also choose to do a fellowship to gain more training in a subspecialty in their field of expertise. The fellowship can last 2 years or more.

Doctors also keep up-to-date in their knowledge of medicine by taking continuing medical education courses.

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EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR A MEDICAL DOCTOR:

- **Bachelor's Degree** – 4 years of education at a college or university
- **Medical Degree** – 4 years of education and training at an accredited medical school or school of osteopathic medicine
- **Medical License** – All practicing doctors must have a license to practice medicine in the state (or states) where they are working
- **Specialty Training** – Doctors enter into a residency program for 3 to 8 years (the length of the training can vary depending on the specialty chosen) of professional training under the supervision of senior physicians
- **Board Certification** – Certification ensures that the doctor has been tested to assess his or her knowledge and experience in a specialty and is deemed qualified to provide patient care in that specialty
- **Fellowship** – Some doctors pursue 2 or more years of additional training in a subspecialty to become even more specialized in a particular field
- **Continuing Medical Education (CME)** – Doctors may continue to receive credits for continuing education. Some states, professional organizations, and hospital medical staff organizations require a certain number of CME credits per year to ensure that the doctor's knowledge remains current

Additional Sources: Association of American Medical Colleges, American Board of Medical Specialties, American Osteopathic Association, American Medical Association, The AMA Encyclopedia of Medicine

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DOCTORS OF OSTEOPATHIC MEDICINE (DOs):

In addition to physicians who receive a doctor of medicine degree (MD), there are also physicians who receive a doctor of osteopathy degree (DO). DOs must pass the same national and state medical board examinations and also train in some of the same specialty programs as MDs.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) Public Education Program (provides information on doctors board certified by ABMS) 800/776-2378 or www.abms.org
- American Osteopathic Association 800/621-1773 or www.aoa-net.org/consumers/consumers.htm
- American Medical Association AMA Physician Select (provides information on licensed doctors) www.ama-assn.org/aps/amahg.htm

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer. This page on medical education has been updated from the Patient Page published September 2, 1998.

