

# Medical Specialties

Future physicians go to **medical school** after they complete college. Medical students learn about many different areas of medicine, including those designated as specialties. At the end of medical school, doctors choose the specialty in which they will have more education and eventually practice. Education in each specialty takes 3 to 7 years of a residency after medical school. Some medical specialties have **subspecialties** that require even more education and training. Since medical knowledge is so complex and advanced, most doctors limit their practices to their area of specialization. The September 5, 2007, issue of *JAMA* is a theme issue on medical education. This Patient Page is based on one previously published in the September 3, 2003, issue of *JAMA*.

## PRIMARY CARE SPECIALTIES

- Family medicine (primary care of adults and children)
- Internal medicine (primary care of adults)
- Pediatrics (primary care of children)

Doctors who practice in the primary care specialties focus on general care of the patient. They often coordinate the specialized care that a patient may receive from different medical specialists. Primary care physicians usually provide continuing care for patients over a long time. They are also concerned with preventing diseases and medical problems.

## OTHER SPECIALTIES

- Allergy and immunology (allergic diseases)
- Anesthesiology (pain control and other care during surgery)
- Colon and rectal surgery
- Dermatology (skin diseases)
- Emergency medicine (emergency care)
- Medical genetics
- Neurology (diseases of the nervous system)
- Neurosurgery (surgery of the brain and nervous system)
- Nuclear medicine (use of nuclear materials in diagnosis and treatment)
- Obstetrics and gynecology (female reproductive system including prenatal and birth care)
- Ophthalmology (eye diseases)
- Orthopedic surgery (bones and joints)
- Otolaryngology (ear, nose, and throat)
- Pathology (diagnosis of tissues and body fluids)
- Physical medicine and rehabilitation
- Plastic surgery (skin and body surface)
- Preventive medicine (public health and disease prevention)
- Psychiatry (mental disorders)
- Radiology (diagnosis using images; radiation therapy)
- Surgery (general surgery)
- Thoracic surgery (chest and heart surgery)
- Urology (kidneys and urinary system)

## SUBSPECIALTIES

Examples of subspecialties of internal medicine and pediatrics include **cardiology** (heart disease), **nephrology** (kidney diseases), and **rheumatology** (arthritis and connective tissue diseases). Examples of surgical subspecialties include **hand surgery** and **vascular** (blood vessel) **surgery**.

Information on specialties can be obtained from the **American Board of Medical Specialties**, an organization that regulates the development of specialties in medicine. This organization upholds the standards that allow doctors to become **board certified**. When a doctor meets all the requirements of a medical specialty board (a required level of education, experience, and specialized testing of knowledge and skill), she or he is called a diplomate of that specialty board. The doctor is then allowed to state that she or he is board certified in that medical specialty. A doctor's board certification can be verified through the American Board of Medical Specialties.

Sources: American Board of Medical Specialties, American Medical Association, Council of Medical Specialty Societies

Janet M. Torpy, MD, Writer

Alison E. Burke, MA, Illustrator

Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor

The JAMA Patient Page is a public service of JAMA. The information and recommendations appearing on this page are appropriate in most instances, but they are not a substitute for medical diagnosis. For specific information concerning your personal medical condition, JAMA suggests that you consult your physician. This page may be photocopied noncommercially by physicians and other health care professionals to share with patients. To purchase bulk reprints, call 203/259-8724.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- American Board of Medical Specialties  
[www.abms.org](http://www.abms.org)
- Council of Medical Specialty Societies  
[www.cmss.org](http://www.cmss.org)

## INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page link on JAMA's Web site at [www.jama.com](http://www.jama.com). Many are available in English and Spanish.

