What does a Physician Assistant (PA) do?

Under the supervision of a physician, PA’s do the following:

- Conduct physical exams
- Diagnose and treat illnesses
- Order and interpret tests
- Counsel on preventive health care
- Assist in surgery
- Prescribe medications

What degree do I need to be a PA?

All accredited PA programs must meet the same educational standards, but they have the flexibility to offer a variety of academic degrees. The average PA program is 27 months long and includes clinical classroom education and clinical rotations. More than four-fifths of PA programs offer a master’s degree, which typically require a bachelor’s degree including prerequisite coursework. Only graduates of accredited programs are eligible to sit for the Physician Assistant National Certifying Examination (PANCE).

What classes do I need to take to get into a PA program?

PA programs typically expect a number of prerequisites to be fulfilled before admission. Program requirements vary from institution to institution, so it is best to get specific information from the programs that are of interest. You can explore specific programs here and you may want to subscribe to the PAEA online directory for a convenient source of information. Below is a list of frequently required courses. The ones in the first two columns are required by a majority of programs; courses in the third column are required by fewer than half of CASPA participating programs:

- Physiology
- General Chemistry
- Anatomy
- Microbiology
- General Biology
- Statistics
- Organic Chemistry
- Biochemistry
- Calculus
- Genetics

What test do I need to take for admission?

In addition to satisfying pre-PA course and clinical hour requirements, applicants must submit test scores from the Graduate Record Examination (GRE).

What does a competitive applicant look like?

In 2010-11, the average undergraduate GPA of matriculants to CASPA-participating PA programs was 3.49 and the science GPA was 3.43. Of critical importance for admission to PA programs is hours of clinical experience. 86% of PA programs require or prefer that applicants have previous healthcare experience. The minimum requirements range from 500 to 5000 hours and restrictions are often placed on what types of activities qualify, but matriculating students on average have far more than the minimum requirement. In 2010-2011, the average matriculant had 7,700 hours of previous healthcare experience in categories that ranged from patient contact to research to shadowing.

How do I apply?

The Central Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA) provides a simplified process of applying to PA programs. Applicants complete one application and submit it with corresponding materials to the centralized service. CASPA verifies the application components for accuracy, calculates the applicant’s GPA, and sends the materials to the PA programs that the applicant designates. Not all programs participate in CASPA, so it is important to consult their specific websites.

When do I apply?

DON’T PROCRASTINATE! Application deadlines vary considerably from school to school, and the processes depend on whether the program subscribes to the CASPA. In either case, it is advisable to complete the application process early.

What sites do I need to check out?

Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA): www.paeaonline.org
PA Focus: http://pafocus.org
Central Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA): https://portal.caspaonline.org/
GWU Physician Assistant Program: http://www.gwumc.edu/healthsci/academics/phyassist.cfm