

Physician Education and Training Pathway

From college to independent practice — who oversees each stage

#	Stage	What Happens
1	Undergraduate Education <i>4 years</i> Colleges and Universities	Students complete a bachelor's degree, typically with a science focus. There is no single required major, but most applicants complete biology, chemistry, physics, and math coursework. The MCAT exam is taken during or after this stage.
2	Medical School <i>4 years</i> Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME)-Accredited (MD) or Commission on Osteopathic Accreditation (AOA)-Accredited Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine (DO) Programs	Students complete two years of foundational science coursework followed by two years of clinical rotations. Graduates earn an MD or DO degree. The National Resident Matching Program (NRMP) Match or other matching programs occur in the fourth year for most students.
3	Residency <i>3-7 years depending on specialty</i> ACGME-Accredited Programs at Teaching Hospitals or Other Sponsoring Institutions	Residency is the first phase of supervised post-graduate clinical training (also called graduate medical education (GME)). Residents are physicians who hold a medical degree and are licensed to practice. They practice under physician supervision while developing specialty competence. Length of programs varies, for example 3 years for internal medicine and pediatrics; 5 years for general surgery; 7 years for neurological surgery. The ACGME accredits these programs, reviews them annually, and can cite a program and make an accreditation decision to, or continue, warn or withdraw its accreditation or place it on probation
4	Fellowship (where applicable) <i>1-3+ years</i> ACGME-Accredited Subspecialty Programs	Following residency, physicians who wish to subspecialize complete additional fellowship education program(s). Fellowships are ACGME-accredited for most major subspecialties. Examples include cardiology (3 years after internal medicine residency), pediatric surgery (2 years after general surgery residency), and child and adolescent psychiatry (2 years after psychiatry residency). Not all physicians complete a fellowship. The ACGME's direct role in a physician's education and training pathway ends at the conclusion of accredited training.

5	Independent Licensure <i>Continuous</i> State Medical Boards	During or upon completion of residency, physicians apply for a full, unrestricted medical license in the state(s) where they intend to practice. Most physicians hold a restricted training license for the first year(s) of residency. The full license is issued by the state board after verification of training requirements, passing USMLE or COMLEX exams, and a background review.
6	Board Certification <i>Ongoing: Initial exam + continuing certification</i> American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) Member Boards/AOA/Other Specialty Certifying Bodies	After completing accredited education and training and obtaining full licensure, physicians are eligible to sit for specialty board exams administered by ABMS member boards, the AOA, or other specialty certifying bodies. Passing these exams and meeting other eligibility requirements confers board certification. Physicians should maintain certification through continuing education and periodic assessments.
7	Independent Practice <i>Career-long</i> Physicians — Accountable to State Boards and Hospital Credentialing Bodies	Licensed, trained physicians enter independent practice in hospitals, clinics, group practices, or other settings. Hospital credentialing bodies verify training, licensure, and certification before granting clinical privileges. Physicians maintain ongoing licensure, complete continuing medical education (CME), and sustain board certification.

