

LICENSED TO SERVE

After earning their degrees, the hard work isn't over for MDs, DOs, NPs and PAs. They must be licensed in their specific state and must take advantage of educational opportunities to maintain their licenses.

MD, DO, NP & PA: What's the Difference?

YOUR HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS' CREDENTIALS SAY A LOT ABOUT THEIR EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND AND PREPARATION FOR THE WORK THEY DO.

YOU PROBABLY RECOGNIZE that when you make an appointment with a health care provider, you don't always see a physician. Sometimes, you see a nurse practitioner or physician assistant.

What do various credential abbreviations like "MD," "DO," "NP" and "PA" indicate about how differently medical professionals are trained for what they do? You're about to find out.

MEDICAL DOCTOR

The road to becoming a medical doctor (MD), also called a physician, is long and rigorous, taking between 7 and 15 years. No matter what specialty a doctor chooses, the journey begins with four years of medical school. This is followed by three to seven years of residency. During this time, future doctors undergo a kind of apprenticeship. Working under the watchful eye of experienced doctors, residents provide real care to real patients.

Following residency, many physicians begin their careers. Others undergo fellowship training. This adds another one to three years of study. However, this additional time is necessary to master certain disciplines.

Physicians who earn a doctor of osteopathy (DO) degree undergo similar training as MDs. They have the same licensing and capabilities as their MD peers. The primary difference between a DO and an MD is that DOs practice medicine that is more traditional and holistic in nature, focusing on mind-body-spirit. DOs undergo extensive hands-on training on the musculoskeletal system. As with MDs, DOs include surgeons and other specialists.

NURSE PRACTITIONER

Nurse practitioners (NPs) are experienced registered nurses who have earned a bachelor's degree and go on to complete an additional three to five years of advanced education at the master's or doctoral level. NPs must pass a national examination to be certified to practice.

In Maryland, NPs are licensed to practice independently, provide primary and acute care to patients and prescribe medicine. Their specialties can focus on adult or pediatric care or on specific medical areas such as oncology, critical care, psychiatry and many others.

Other advanced practice registered nurse roles include certified registered nurse anesthetists (CRNAs), certified nurse midwives (CNMs) and clinical nurse specialists (CNSs).

PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT

Also known as PAs, physician assistants undergo rigorous, master's-level education. Because health care experience is required prior to acceptance into a PA program, many PAs begin their careers as paramedics, athletic trainers and other caregivers.

PA-specific training takes approximately three years. As with MDs, DOs and NPs, PAs must pass a national certification test after graduation. This ensures they have the knowledge necessary to care for patients.

PAs practice with a physician, who is responsible for outlining what aspects of patient care the PA may provide. Examples include prescribing medication and assisting during surgery.



Learn more about what different credentials mean in our Live Greater podcast at umms.com/MDvNP. To find a primary care provider to help you manage your health, visit umms.org/find-a-doctor.