



Career Guide
Office of Health Professions Advising

Pathologists' Assistant

What is a Pathologists' Assistant?

Pathologists' Assistants [PA (ASCP)] provide anatomical and pathology services under the supervision of a pathologist. They perform a variety of tasks including gross examination of surgical pathology specimens and performance of autopsies. Anatomic pathology generally falls into three main categories for diagnostic purposes: examination of cells (cytopathology), tissues (surgical pathology), or the body (autopsy). Pathologists' Assistants duties include dissection and preparation of specimens, obtaining clinical histories, preparing tissues for histologic processing, photographing pertinent gross specimens, performing postmortem exams as well as administrative duties. Pathologists' Assistants work mostly in surgical pathology with fewer of them performing autopsies because of sharp declines in autopsy rates in the United States. Pathologists' Assistant programs are basically an outgrowth of the Physician Assistant programs that began in the 1960s as physician extenders.

How do I become a PA (ASCP)?

To attend one of the accredited Pathologists' Assistant programs, you will need a bachelor's degree with any major of your choice (though biology, chemistry, and medical technology majors are especially encouraged) as long as you have the appropriate prerequisite courses (see next page). Programs generally consist of a year of courses and 10-12 months of clinical work. Some people enter the field after working in clinical laboratory science and cytotechnology. Once your clinical training is successfully completed, you must pass the national certification exam and be licensed in your state as a PA (ASCP). Most programs take 22-24 months and result in a master's degree.

What is the job outlook?

The demand for Pathologists' Assistants is growing. Increasing pressure to control healthcare costs has led to more reliance on allied health personnel. In addition, many laboratories nationwide are facing manpower shortages. Pathologists' Assistants work in hospitals, academic centers, private pathology laboratories, medical research centers, and medical examiner offices. Salaries range from \$70,000-90,000 and most students are employed before leaving their graduate programs.

What prerequisite courses do I need?

Although PA (ASCP) programs do not have a standard set of requirements, many similarities in their requirements do exist. The initial courses are similar to other professional health care fields such as MD programs, but some further courses are required. Most schools require: English composition (at least 1 semester), general biology (1 year with lab), math, microbiology (1 semester), general chemistry (1 year with lab), organic chemistry (at least 1 semester with lab), and biochemistry (1 semester). Programs may also require or recommend anatomy and physiology, histology, cell biology, molecular biology, physics, statistics, genetics, and/or immunology. Because course requirements can vary substantially between programs, you should look at possible programs to which you would like to apply early in your academic career to make sure you meet their requirements.

What else do I need to do before I apply?

You need to shadow a PA (ASCP) to make sure this is the right field for you and that you truly understand what it is that a Pathologists' Assistant does. An aptitude test is also needed to apply to these graduate programs. Both the GRE and the MCAT are generally acceptable. Most programs require at least a 3.0 to apply, but as many of the programs are quite small, a higher GPA would be more competitive. If English is not your first language, a TOEFL exam may also be required.

How do I apply?

Application is made directly with the schools you would like to attend. Early application is recommended as many programs take only a handful of students.

Where can I get more information?

American Association of Pathologists' Assistants <http://www.pathologistsassistants.org>

Programs in the region:

Indiana University <http://www.pathology.iupui.edu/htm/path-ast-main.htm>

Rosalind Franklin University <http://www.rosalindfranklin.edu/srhs/pathasst/>

For more information about Pathologists' Assistant programs or your interests in the health professions, contact the Health Professions Advisor, Amy Terstriep, Ph.D., at 765-494-4747 or prehealth@purdue.edu.