

The Pathologist



A pathologist is a physician (MD or DO) who examines tissues and is responsible for the accuracy of laboratory tests. Pathologists interpret the results of these examinations and tests—information that is important for the patient’s diagnosis and recovery. The pathologist and the patient’s other doctors consult on which tests to order, interpretation of test results, and appropriate treatments. Pathologists play a vital role on the patient’s primary health care team.

Pathologists are problem-solvers, fascinated by the process of disease and eager to unlock medical mysteries, like AIDS and diabetes, using the tools of laboratory science and its sophisticated instruments and methods. Today, with advances in biomedical science, more than 2,000 laboratory tests on blood and body fluids are available. Many require specialized professional interpretation by an expert, usually a pathologist.

Pathologists work in many areas of the medical laboratory, and a pathologist usually serves as Director of the Laboratory. In the blood bank, pathologists and medical technologists ensure that the blood or blood products you receive are safe. In microbiology, microorganisms that can cause infections – bacteria, viruses, fungi, and parasites – are identified so the most effective drugs to treat an infection can be selected. Autopsy, while an important tool in medicine, represents only a small part of the typical pathologist’s practice.

A clinical pathologist oversees laboratory tests conducted on body fluids such as blood and urine. An anatomic pathologist assists surgeons during operations by providing immediate diagnoses on biopsies—specially treated tissues removed in surgery and rushed to the lab. A forensic pathologist uses the science of the laboratory to answer questions about evidence collected for criminal and civil cases. Other pathologists conduct research in pathology, developing new tests and new instruments to better diagnose diseases.

“I really enjoy the diagnostic process. That’s what pathologists do. I also like the way pathology is a broad intellectual field.”

Careers
in Pathology and Medical Laboratory Science

Minimum Education Requirement: (MD)

Satisfactory completion of medical school, an accredited student Resident Program, and an approved residency in Pathology.

Career Preparation

To prepare for a career as a pathologist, one needs a solid foundation in high school science and mathematics. Plan to take any courses offered in biology, chemistry, physics, algebra, geometry, calculus, and computer science. Some undergraduate schools offer a pre-medical school curriculum, which typically focuses on biology and chemistry, to prepare students for medical school. To gain entrance to medical school, students must have a bachelor's degree, get good grades, and score well on the Medical College Admission Test administered by the Association of American Medical Colleges.

Medical school typically lasts four years. During their final year of medical school, students work in clinical rotations in practice settings, getting exposure to the many different areas of practice, such as pathology, emergency medicine, and cardiology. After completing their four years of study, students earn the Medical Doctor (MD) degree.

The next step for newly minted medical doctors is to undergo four years of residency training in the field of their choice. In pathology, that may mean rotations in clinical pathology, surgical pathology, and autopsy pathology. ASCP offers subspecialty grants for residents to do two- to four-week elective clinical rotations at outside institutions, allowing residents to broaden their training experience by exposing them to material that is not currently available at their institution and by allowing them to work with a prominent pathologist a field of interest.

Teaching is another important component of the pathology resident's experience. Third and fourth year residents teach medical students and also have opportunities to conduct research.

Upon completion of the residency program, pathologists are then eligible to take the examination that certifies them to practice. The American Board of Pathology administers the exam and certifies pathologists. Certification must be renewed every 10 years. In order to maintain their certification, pathologists must take continuing medical education classes and perform formalized self assessments every three years.

Salaries

Starting salaries for most pathologists exceed \$125,000 a year. Of course, salaries vary depending upon geographic region and place of employment. Pathologists work mostly in community hospitals, university medical centers, reference laboratories, and private industry. Despite popular perception, only a small number of pathologists work as coroners or medical examiners.

Opportunities to Specialize

Many pathologists choose to apply for fellowships after completing their residency. Fellowships give pathologists the opportunity to specialize in an area of interest, under the guidance of an experienced pathologist. Pathology subspecialties include blood banking and transfusion medicine, chemical pathology, cytopathology, forensic pathology, hematology, immunopathology, medical microbiology, neuropathology, pediatric pathology, dermatopathology, and molecular genetic pathology.

Key Contacts

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The American Society for Clinical Pathology provides excellence in education, certification, and advocacy on behalf of patients, pathologists, and laboratory professionals. Founded in 1922, ASCP is a professional society with 140,000 member pathologists and medical laboratory professionals.