



What Does a
Medical Assistant Do?



Although nurses and physicians receive most of the recognition, medical assistants play a very important role in the health care field. Medical assistants are cross-trained to perform a variety of clinical and administrative tasks in medical settings of varying size and scope, including hospitals, outpatient facilities, nursing homes and private practices. As you will learn in this guide, medical assisting is a dynamic and fast-paced entry-level health care career.

But why would you want to become a medical assistant in the first place? Before we look at the specific tasks and responsibilities that come with being a medical assistant, let's begin with the benefits. Over the next few pages we'll look at some of the top reasons people choose to become medical assistants, including good pay, growing demand and opportunities for career growth.



1. Why Should I Become a Medical Assistant?

Whether you've always dreamed of working in the medical field or have just recently started thinking about a health care career, becoming a medical assistant is a great place to start. U.S. News ranked [medical assisting](#) #18 in its list of Best Health Care Support Jobs and #81 in its 100 Best Jobs list, noting salary and future job growth among the job's positive attributes.

For starters, becoming a medical assistant is one of the easiest ways to get your foot in the door in the medical field. In less than two years, you can become trained and certified to work as a medical assistant, which can open the door to other health care careers in the future (earn your Certificate in Medical Assisting in about 9 months). The [American Association of Medical Assistants](#) explains, "Medical assistants may be able to advance to office manager. They may qualify for a variety of administrative support occupations, or may teach medical assisting. Some, with additional education, enter other health occupations, such as nursing and medical technology."

Working as a medical assistant can also be highly rewarding, especially for people who strive to help others. The administrative support medical assistants bring to hospitals, clinics and private practices allow doctors and nurses to spend more time with patients, which can lead to better outcomes for people who are sick or injured. Medical assistants themselves also provide clinical support and can be instrumental in caring for patients.

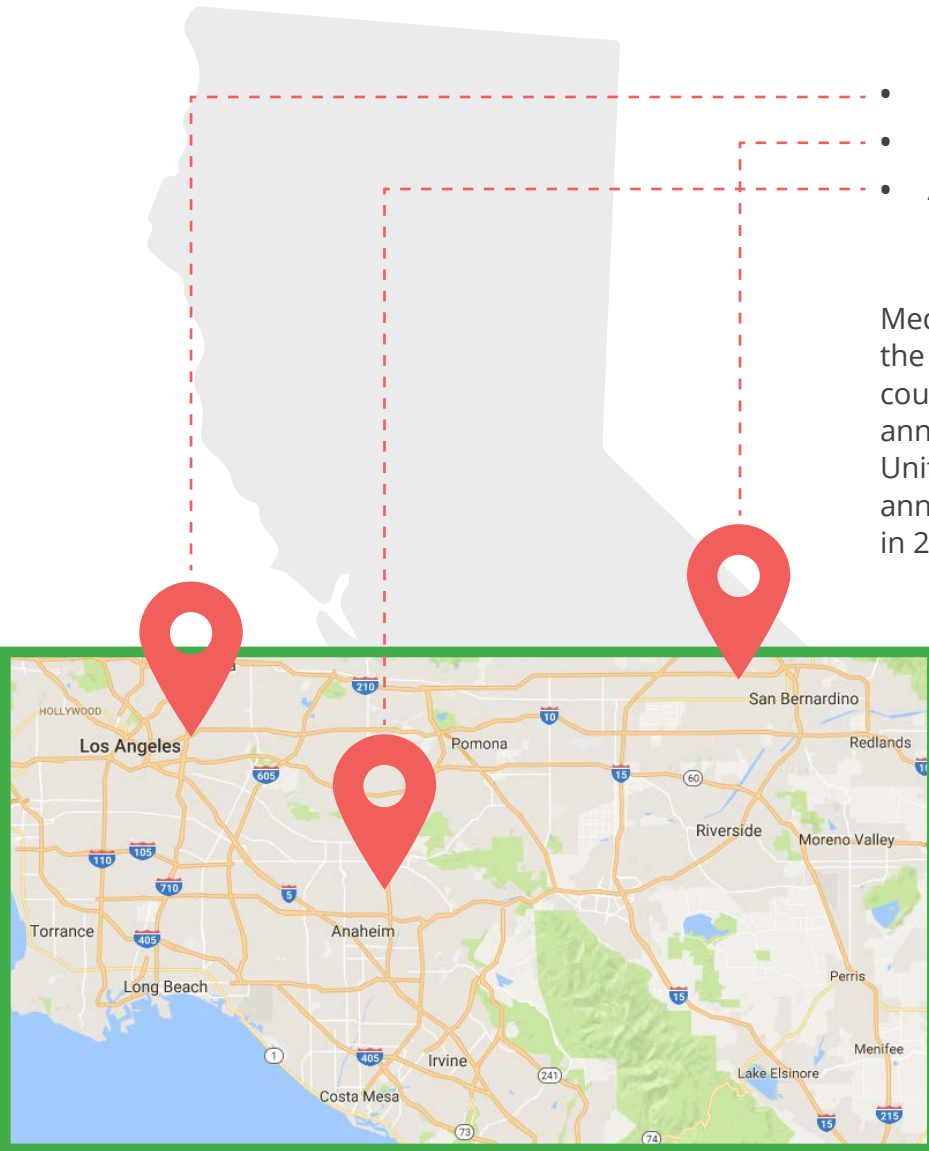
What Does a Medical Assistant Do?

Medical assisting is also considered a “hot job” in health care because of the projected growth over the next decade. According to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), employment of medical assistants in the United States is expected to increase 23 percent through 2024, which translates to approximately 140,000 new jobs. This projected growth is much

faster than the average for all occupations ([7 percent, according to the BLS](#)). Job prospects are particularly good in California, which has the [highest employment of medical assistants](#) in the country. According to data from the BLS, the following metropolitan areas are among the best for medical assistants:

- **Los Angeles-Long Beach-Glendale, CA**
- **Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario, CA**
- **Anaheim-Santa Ana-Irvine, CA**

Medical assistants in California are also among the highest-paid in their profession in the country. According to the BLS, the median annual wage for all medical assistants in the United States in 2015 was \$30,590; the median annual wage for medical assistants in California in 2015 was slightly higher at \$35,440.



2. What Do Medical Assistants Do?

Medical assistants are the multi-purpose tools of the health care field. The job is a mix of traditional medical office work, including filing insurance forms and scheduling patient visits, as well as hands-on clinical tasks like collecting samples for lab tests and assisting with patient

examinations. Before we look at some of the specific administrative and clinical duties medical assistants are responsible for, it might be helpful to first look at the general day-to-day work activities medical assistants engage in.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor’s [O*NET OnLine](#), a medical assistant’s routine duties and responsibilities can be summed up by the following work activities:

Importance	Work Activity	Scale:	0	25	50	75	100
93	Assisting and Caring for Others – Providing personal assistance, medical attention, emotional support or other personal care to others (coworkers, customers and/or patients).						
91	Documenting/Recording Information – Entering, transcribing, recording, storing and/or maintaining information in written and electronic form.						
88	Getting Information – Observing, receiving and obtaining information from all relevant sources.						
84	Communicating with Others – Providing information to supervisors, coworkers, customers and patients by telephone, in written form, email and in-person.						
83	Interpreting the Meaning of Information – Translating or explaining what information means and how it can be used.						
81	Documenting/Recording Information – Entering, transcribing, recording, storing and/or maintaining information in written and electronic form.						
77	Organizing, Planning and Prioritizing – Developing specific goals and plans to prioritize, organize and accomplish work.						
74	Establishing and Maintaining Working Relationships – Developing constructive and cooperative working relationships with others, and maintaining them over time.						
71	Resolving Conflicts and Negotiating with Others – Handling complaints, settling disputes and resolving grievances and conflicts, or otherwise negotiating with others.						
70	Scheduling Work and Activities – Scheduling events, programs and activities, as well as the work of others.						



Administrative Duties

Part of what separates medical assistants from similar positions such as physician's assistants and nursing assistants are the administrative duties medical assistants are responsible for. Medical assistants are extremely important to the day-to-day operation of medical clinics and physician's offices, so much so that some medical assistants are hired exclusively in an administrative front-office position.

The [American Association of Medical Assistants](#) (AAMA) lists the following administrative duties as part of the medical assistant's job description:

- **Answering Telephones:** This seemingly simple task is critical to any medical office. Medical assistants need to communicate clearly with patients over the phone to determine the nature of their call, gather information about their medical needs and schedule an appointment with the appropriate care provider. Medical assistants also take calls from vendors and the public, so good phone etiquette is important for maintaining the professional nature of the medical office.
- **Greeting Patients:** Greetings are very important in medical settings, especially the first impression given to new patients. Medical assistants are often the first staff members patients interact with when coming in for an appointment, so it's important that they create a safe and welcoming environment to help patients feel at ease before an examination or treatment.
- **Updating/Filing Medical Records:** One of the most important administrative tasks as a medical assistant is keeping patient medical records current and filing them correctly. These medical records are critical in delivering appropriate and timely patient care. In addition to maintaining and filing records "in-house," medical assistants may also request patient records from other care providers.
- **Coding and Filing Out Insurance Forms:** Coding and billing are among the chief administrative operations for any medical office, or at least those offices that wish to get paid. Although health care offices and facilities sometimes hire [medical billing and coding](#) personnel specifically for this task, medical assistants may also be responsible for inputting medical codes for healthcare reimbursements and insurance payments.
- **Scheduling Appointments:** A properly used appointment system helps maintain an efficient medical office, which is why scheduling and managing the flow of patient care is another important duty assigned to medical assistants. The size of the practice and/or the medical staff's preference will determine whether medical assistants are responsible for maintaining a manual or computerized appointment scheduling system.
- **Arranging Services:** In cases where a physician recommends the patient visit a specialist, the medical assistant is responsible for arranging services and providing the specialist with the necessary and appropriate patient information. Medical assistants also arrange for hospital admissions and laboratory services as needed and directed by a physician.



What Does a Medical Assistant Do?

Clinical Duties

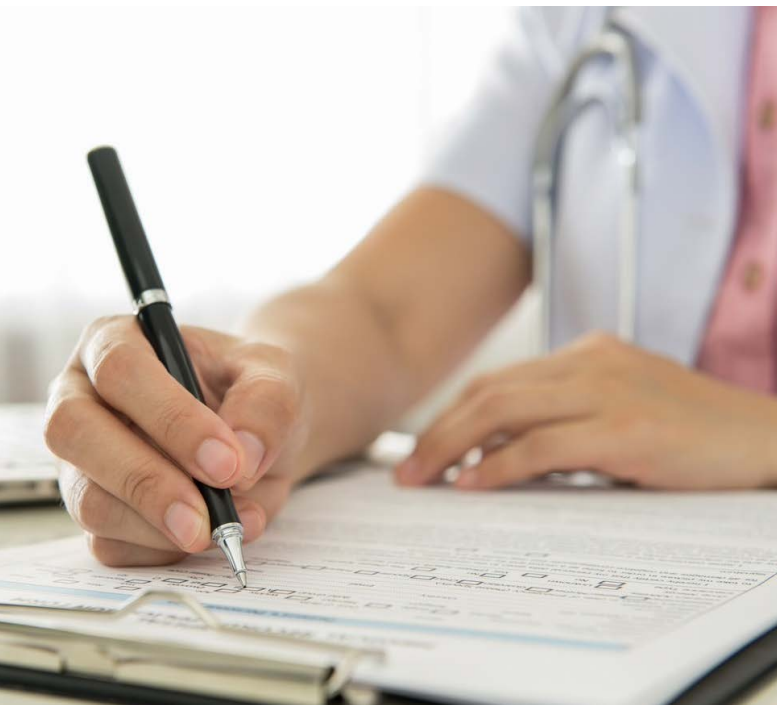
In addition to the clerical and administrative tasks outlined above, medical assistants are a crucial part of a provider's clinical staff and are tasked with a variety of "back-office" duties. The exact clinical responsibilities depend on the type and size of the practice, as well as the individual's training and experience, but medical assistants generally perform many different tasks each day focused on patient care.

According to the [AAMA](#), a medical assistant's clinical duties may include:

- **Explaining Treatment Procedures to Patients:** Although medical assistants are not licensed to make independent medical assessments or give advice, with specific training and direction they are able to explain treatment procedures, lab results and aftercare instructions on behalf of a medical professional. This is one of the reasons bilingual medical assistants are in such high demand, especially in

California where there is a disparity between the number of Spanish-speaking patients and multilingual care providers. Bilingual, Spanish-speaking medical assistants will continue to be in high demand as the Latino and Hispanic populations in the United States grow.

- **Assisting Physicians During an Exam:** General examinations allow physicians to determine a patient's overall state of health and diagnose a medical problem. Medical assistants help physicians before, during and after an examination by ensuring that exam rooms are clean and stocked with instruments and supplies, positioning a patient for examination, documenting vital signs and scheduling follow-up appointments or lab services, among other duties.
- **Collecting and Preparing Laboratory Specimens:** Depending on their certification, experience and employer, some medical assistants may be responsible for collecting and preparing lab specimens. Medical assistants gather biological specimens in several different ways, including blood samples, urine samples, tissue samples and throat swabs. Medical assistants may also be responsible for performing basic laboratory tests on the premises and explaining the results to the medical staff and patients.
- **Preparing and Administering Medications:** Medical assistants are oftentimes asked to prepare and administer medications to a patient. However, there is a limit to what medical assistants can do when it comes to administering medication. According to the [Medical Board of California](#), medical assistants may inject, handle and provide medications to a patient (including injections of scheduled drugs after receiving appropriate training) but are not allowed to administer medications or injections intravenously through an IV line.



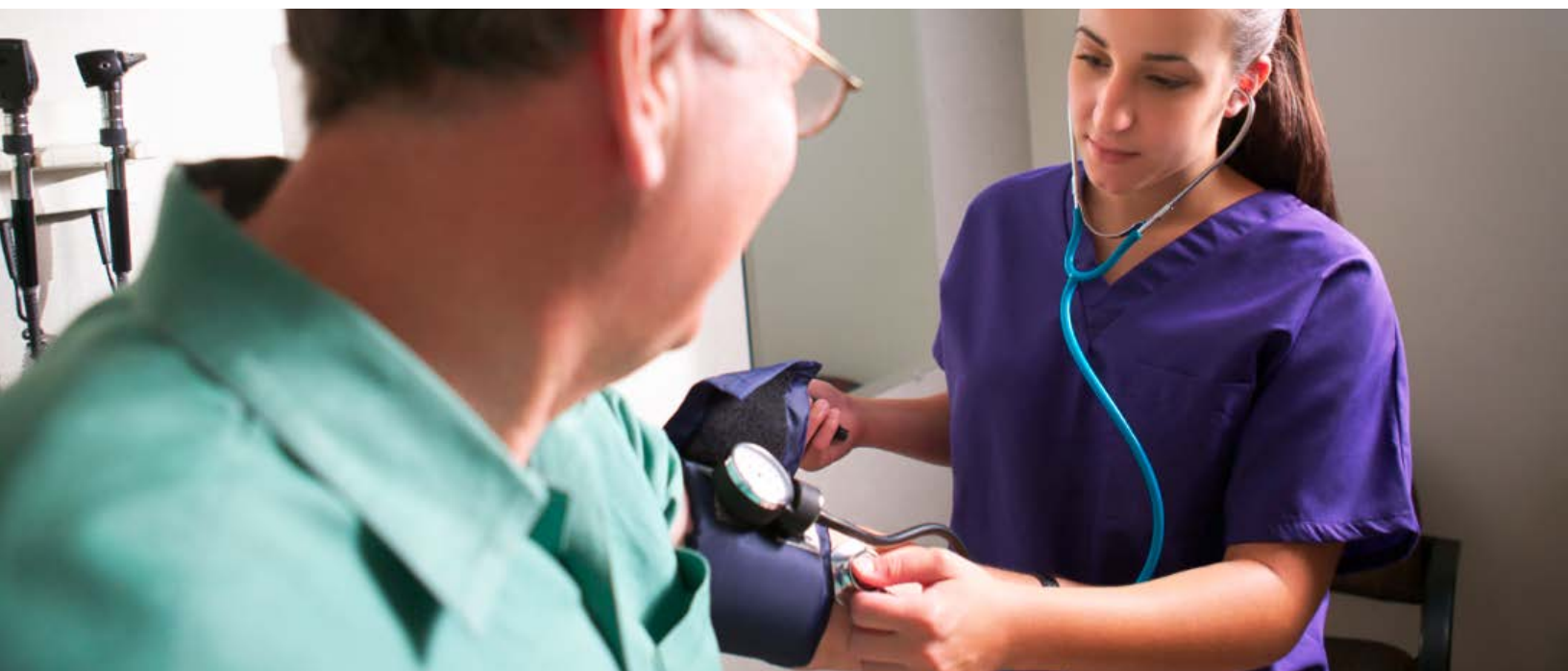
3. Where Do Medical Assistants Work?

Although medical assistants are capable of performing a wide array of administrative and clinical tasks, the specific duties can vary depending on the setting in which they work. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, most medical assistants work in physicians' offices, hospitals, outpatient clinics and other healthcare facilities. Here is a brief look at some of the specific day-to-day responsibilities of medical assistants in a few different work environments.

1. Medical Assistants in Clinics: Medical assistants working in clinics are often referred to as "generalists" because of their wide-ranging duties and responsibilities. Especially in smaller clinics, medical assistants in this environment fill any of the gaps needed to help office managers,

physicians, nurses or other health practitioners carry out patient procedures and keep the clinic running smoothly.

- 2. Medical Assistants in Private Practices:** Because medical assistants can handle a broad range of clinical and administrative duties, physicians depend on them to help manage the complexities of running a private practice and providing patient care. The duties and responsibilities of a medical assistant working in this sector of healthcare are often personalized to the unique and specific needs of the practice in which they work.
- 3. Medical Assistants in Hospitals:** Medical assistants hired on to work in hospital settings are usually given specific duties relating to either the administrative or clinical side of the job. In other words, hospital medical assistants are not usually given as wide a range of duties as "generalists" working in clinics and private practices. For this reason, hospitals usually attract individuals who prefer to specialize as either an administrative or clinical medical assistant.



4. Is Medical Assisting Right for You?

There are some very specific skills medical assistants need to do their job, as well as specific skills employers look for when hiring medical assistants. Training programs teach all of the technical skills medical assistants need to perform their clinical and administrative responsibilities, but there are some important characteristics aspiring medical assistants should have prior to going to school and pursuing a career in the field.

- 1. Attention to Detail** – Whether it's performing lab procedures, scheduling appointments, preparing the exam room or administering medication, medical assistants need to bring focus and attention to detail to every task they perform.
- 2. Dependability** – Medical assistants play a crucial role in the day-to-day operation of any health care facility, which means their absence is felt by patients and physicians alike. Medical assistants should be dependable, reliable and trustworthy.
- 3. Honesty and Integrity** – Honesty and integrity are important traits for any medical assistant. Medical assistants are entrusted with sensitive patient information that must remain private. Employers will look for demonstrations or examples of these traits for reassurance that medical assistants can be trusted with sensitive and private medical information.
- 4. Cooperation** – The team approach used in most health care settings demands that each member accept his or her role within the organization and cooperate with one another to achieve positive outcomes for patients. Medical assistants are expected to cooperate with the requests of various individuals and departments within a health care setting.
- 5. Self-Control** – Working as a medical assistant in any type of setting can be stressful. Explaining undesirable test results, dealing with emotional patients and working in a fast-paced, high-stress environment requires medical assistants have the self-control to maintain their professional composure no matter what challenges they face.
- 6. Stress Tolerance** – Considering the stress levels medical assistants face daily, having a high stress tolerance is as important as any other job requirement. Medical assistants should have healthy ways of dealing with and overcoming stress in the workplace to ensure that no patient suffers as a result.
- 7. Concern for Others** – People who are drawn to working in health care usually have an unselfish concern for the welfare of others. Because medical assisting can be a thankless job at times, anyone interested in becoming a medical assistant should pursue the career (in part) because they want to help others no matter what.
- 8. Adaptability/Flexibility** – Medical assistants are expected to perform a wide range of administrative and clinical duties, and even those can change unexpectedly on a daily basis. To keep up, medical assistants should be flexible and highly adaptable to change.
- 9. Critical Thinking** – Medical assistants routinely encounter complex administrative and clinical problems that require well-reasoned thoughts to solve. Critical thinking helps medical assistants make quick decisions when matters of office administration or patient care are involved.
- 10. Organization** – Taking care of multiple patients, filling out paperwork and keeping up with requests for administrative and clinical support from various physicians and departments requires exceptional organization. Multitasking and good organization are key for medical assistants.



5. Do You Need to be Certified to Work as a Medical Assistant?

Unlike many other entry-level health care jobs, medical assistants are not required to be licensed, certified or registered. This is one of the reasons why medical assisting is attractive to men and women who want to start a career in health care as quickly as possible. However, there are benefits to becoming certified. For example, some employers prefer to hire medical assistants that have been certified by a national or private association as it demonstrates proficiency in the skills, abilities and responsibilities of the position. The Medical Board of California (MBC) also notes that [medical assistants must be certified](#) by an approved certifying organization in order to train other medical assistants, which means certification is often required for career advancement.

The American Association of Medical Assistants notes that employers are paying higher wages for certified medical assistants and explains the [increased demand for certified MAs](#) as the result of “pressure of potential malpractice suits and the certification mandates placed on employers by managed care organization.” As for the job outlook, the AAMA also says that job prospects

in the future will be best for medical assistants with formal training or experience, particularly those with certification.

Some of the leading certifications for medical assistants include:

- **California Certified Medical Assistant (CCMA)** – The CCMA is administered by the California Certifying Board of Medical Assistants. In order to sit for the [CCMA exam](#), applicants must either be currently employed as a medical assistant by a licensed physician (or employed for at least two of the previous five years) or have a certificate of completion or degree from an accredited medical assisting program.
- **National Certified Medical Assistant (NCMA)** – The NCMA is administered by the National Center for Competency Testing. Without two years of verifiable full-time experience as a medical assistant or equivalent U.S. military training, the only way to sit for the [NCMA exam](#) is to graduate from an authorized post-secondary medical assistant program.
- **Certified Clinical Medical Assistant (CCMA)** – The CCMA is administered by the National Healthcareer Association. The [CCMA exam](#) has similar requirements and prerequisites as other medical assistant certification exams: Two years of full-time experience in the field (or equivalent U.S. military training) or completion of an approved medical assistant program.

“Medical assistants may be able to advance to office manager. They may qualify for a variety of administrative support occupations, or may teach medical assisting. Some, with additional education, enter other health occupations, such as nursing and medical technology.”

- The American Association of Medical Assistants



6. How to Become a Medical Assistant

If medical assisting sounds like a good fit, you'll be happy to learn that the actual steps to become a medical assistant are relatively easy compared to other health care careers. In approximately 9 months, you can have the credentials, skills and experience necessary to work as a medical assistant in the setting of your choice. To help you plan and get started, here's a brief overview of the steps to becoming a medical assistant.

Step One: Enroll in a Medical Assistant Program

The first step is to enroll in an accredited post-secondary medical assistant training program. Medical assistant programs prepare students to work in the field and teach the skills required to be productive and valuable members of the healthcare support team. Medical assisting programs are offered on-campus and online, and can usually be completed in about 9 months for a Certificate of Completion. Some of the courses you may take include:

- Structural Anatomy and Terminology
- Pharmacology and Medication Administration
- Medical Office Management
- Laboratory Procedures
- Body System Anatomy and Terminology

Step Two: Complete Externship Experience

In addition to training in class or online, you will also gain hands-on experience by completing an externship in a real-life clinical setting. Externships usually come towards the end of the program to give students the opportunity

to put their skills to the test and gain hands-on experience before entering the workforce. Working alongside professional medical assistants and health care providers in the field will give you an up-close look at the day-to-day responsibilities you may have when you start working as a medical assistant yourself.

Step Three: Get a Medical Assistant Certification

As discussed in the previous section of this guide, you aren't required to be certified to work as a medical assistant but most organizations and facilities highly encourage it. Becoming certified isn't hard, especially after graduating from medical assisting school, and there are plenty of good reasons to do so:

- Certification tells employers that you are committed to your profession and dedicated to growth and development as a medical assistant
- Many employers prefer to hire certified medical assistants, and some even require certification
- Certification may increase your earning potential and open additional career opportunities in the future, such as lead medical assistant, medical office manager or medical assistant instructor



What Does a Medical Assistant Do?

San Joaquin Valley College (SJVC) offers a 9-month Certificate of Completion in Medical Assisting at [several campuses throughout California](#). You can also train to become a medical assistant at home by enrolling in SJVC's online medical assisting program. Online students can earn the same Certificate as traditional students, but with the added flexibility and convenience of going to school online.

Graduates of the Certificate-level Medical Assistant program are eligible to sit for the certification exams outlined earlier in this guide. SJVC pays the fees for each graduate's first attempt at the examinations, as long as the examinations are taken within six months of graduation.

[Request more information](#) or call 866-544-7898 to learn more about SJVC's Medical Assisting program.



For more information about how you can make a difference as a **medical assistant...**

CONTACT US NOW!

