

# Recognizing the Role of Medical Assistants in Urgent Care



Each year Medical Assistants Recognition Week is celebrated during the third full week of October – this year the week is Oct. 17-21. In honor of this, we wanted to highlight the critical role medical assistants play in the urgent care industry by supporting doctors and nurses to help speed patient throughput.

Since labor is the single largest expense in urgent care operations, many urgent care centers have found that medical assistants deliver positive patient outcomes more cost-effectively than registered nurses and technicians. In many states, well-trained and supervised medical assistants can perform most clinical support tasks in urgent care.

A medical assistant works under the direct supervision of a physician and is cross-trained to perform both clinical and administrative responsibilities. The 2015 UCAOA Benchmarking Data shows 57 percent of urgent care centers are using medical assistants in their staffing model. This model does require physician engagement, to actively manage the MAs on staff. But there's a major benefit to the center from having skilled and versatile MAs to help with workflow.

There are nearly 600,000 medical assistants in the U.S., according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The job field is expected to grow 23 percent from 2014 to 2024. Job duties range from clinical tasks (taking medical histories, drawing blood, and removing sutures) to administrative duties (answering phones, scheduling appointments, and updating patient records).

These duties vary by location and certification because the tasks approved for medical assistants vary by state. There is no national law that outlines the scope of practice for medical assistants, so states set their own laws and customs. In New York, for example, there are state rules that restrict MAs from performing triage, administering medication, administering dyes or injections, placing or removing sutures, taking x-rays, applying casts, or first assisting in surgical procedures.

In most states outside of New York, urgent care centers use MAs to take vitals and document a patient's chief complaint, medical history, and current medications at the start of the visit for most patients. The role of the medical assistant is to control flow and free up the physician's time to treat patients.

It is important, however, that the MA is not presented to customers or patients as a licensed practitioner. And since there are no national standards for education criteria for medical assistants, healthcare employers must vet each MA for clinical skills and certifications. Formal career paths can vary from a two-year college associate degree program to vocational school offering several months of coursework. A couple widely recognized programs are the Certified Clinical Medical Assistant (CCMA) certificate and the [National HealthCareer Association](#) (NHA) medical assisting certificate.

Most hands-on training will occur with physicians, and even other MAs, in the center—often through internships and job shadowing. To staff using MAs, providers and other urgent care center employees must invest some time and energy, but the investment can be a major long-term win for the facility.

This resource was first published prior to the 2019 merger between DocuTAP and Practice Velocity. The content reflects our legacy brands.

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