

Who's Who in Healthcare

Understanding the People Involved in Your Care

Many people leave medical appointments feeling confused about who they spoke with or what each person on their healthcare team actually does. Modern healthcare involves many different professionals, each with a specific role.

Understanding who does what can make medical situations feel far less overwhelming.

This guide explains some of the most common healthcare roles you may encounter. It isn't a complete list — the healthcare system includes many different professionals. Additional resources may be added over time to help explain other parts of the healthcare system.

Primary Care Physician (PCP)

Your primary care physician manages your overall health and is usually your first point of contact for medical concerns.

They:

- diagnose and treat common conditions
- manage chronic illnesses
- coordinate referrals to specialists when needed

PCPs often oversee the “big picture” of your care.

Specialist

A specialist is a physician with advanced training in a specific area of medicine.

Examples include:

- cardiologists (heart)
- neurologists (brain and nervous system)
- gastroenterologists (digestive system)

Specialists focus on specific conditions related to their field.

Nurse Practitioner (NP)

Nurse practitioners are advanced practice nurses who can evaluate patients, diagnose conditions, and develop treatment plans.

Depending on the setting, they may:

- diagnose medical conditions

- develop treatment plans
- prescribe medications

NPs often work closely with physicians as part of a care team.

Physician Assistant (PA)

Physician assistants are licensed clinicians trained to evaluate patients, diagnose illnesses, and develop treatment plans under physician supervision.

They may:

- perform exams
- order tests
- prescribe medications
- assist with procedures

PAs often provide much of the day-to-day care in medical practices.

Registered Nurse (RN)

Registered nurses are licensed healthcare professionals who provide direct patient care and coordinate many aspects of treatment.

In hospitals and clinics, RNs often:

- monitor patients and assess changes in condition
- administer medications and treatments
- communicate important information to physicians and other providers
- educate patients and families about care and recovery
- help coordinate the overall care plan

Because nurses spend significant time with patients, they often serve as an important bridge between patients, families, and the rest of the healthcare team.

Medical Assistant (MA)

Medical assistants work in many outpatient medical offices and clinics. They help support physicians, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants during patient visits.

Medical assistants often:

- bring patients from the waiting room to exam rooms
- record vital signs such as blood pressure and temperature

- update medical histories
- assist with basic office procedures
- help prepare patients for the provider visit

Medical assistants play an important role in keeping medical offices running smoothly and helping prepare information for the provider. Medical assistants typically work under the supervision of licensed healthcare providers.

Hospital Care Team

Hospitalist

A hospitalist is a physician who specializes in caring for patients during a hospital stay.

They:

- oversee your medical care while hospitalized
- coordinate with specialists
- manage treatment and testing during your admission

Your regular doctor usually does not manage your care in the hospital — that role is handled by hospitalists.

Case Manager

Hospital case managers help coordinate care during and after a hospital stay.

They may assist with:

- discharge planning
- arranging home health services
- coordinating rehabilitation or skilled nursing care
- navigating insurance requirements

Case managers may be registered nurses, social workers, or other trained healthcare professionals depending on the hospital or healthcare system.

Social Worker

Hospital social workers help patients and families address emotional, social, and logistical challenges during medical care.

They may assist with:

- caregiver support

- connecting families with community resources
 - planning for care after discharge
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Therapy and Rehabilitation Professionals

Physical Therapist (PT)

Physical therapists help people improve mobility, strength, and physical function after injury, surgery, or illness.

They often work with patients recovering from:

- orthopedic injuries
 - stroke
 - surgery
 - prolonged hospitalization
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Occupational Therapist (OT)

Occupational therapists help people regain the ability to perform daily activities such as dressing, bathing, cooking, and working.

Their focus is helping patients return to everyday life safely.

Speech-Language Pathologist (Speech Therapist)

Speech therapists evaluate and treat difficulties related to:

- speech and communication
 - swallowing problems
 - cognitive changes after stroke or brain injury
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Healthcare can involve many different professionals working together. Understanding each role can make medical situations feel less confusing and help you know who to turn to with specific questions.

If you ever feel overwhelmed by the complexity of healthcare decisions, remember that clarity often begins by simply understanding how the system works.