

Medical Assistant Overview

The information contained within these pages are provided for information purposes only and should not be considered legal advice, nor is it meant to replace regulations established by any state or federal authorities. It is up to each person to be familiar with laws, if any, in your state.

What does a Medical Assistant do?

Medical Assistants are multitasking individuals that work in fast paced clinical environments. For this reason, it can be said that no two days are the same for the medical assistant. One day may be spent primarily answering phones and scheduling appointments, while the next day you may be busy collecting specimens, performing urinalyses, and drawing blood. It is the responsibility of the medical assistant to be engaged in patient care, dedicated to the effective functioning of the medical facility, and adaptable to changes in the facility protocol or physician needs.

Medical assistant schools prepare graduates to work in almost any medical specialty, so the job duties may be different in any given facility. Overall, however, medical assistants are typically responsible for the completion of both administrative and clinical tasks.

Credentialing agencies do not govern what a medical assistant is allowed to do as part of their job duties. If in doubt, please check the state board of medical examiners in your state to find out if there are any exceptions to what a medical assistant can or cannot do.

Each medical office should have an organized plan that outlines the duties of every staff member in the medical office. It should state who handles patients and who is responsible for what, address how to handle patient assessment, triage, administration of medication, treatment procedures, responses to upset patients and emergency situations, and instruct how to report incidences and follow the so-called chain of command.

A good medical practice and healthcare facility has established policies and provides a written job description to each staff member outlining the responsibilities for each specialty and discipline under their employ, including medical assistants. It is good policy to also instruct each staff member verbally about their specific responsibilities, while also addressing certain limitations they have when performing work related duties. These *responsibilities and limitations* are based on the quality and type of education, training and experience of each employee, as well as taking into consideration established local and state regulations. The responsible medical assistant will accept and demand that these limitations are respected and strictly adhered to wherever they work. Medical assistants can only practice skills that lie within their scope of practice and training. Below is a general list of what a medical assistant can and cannot do.

Examples of What Medical Assistants Can Do

Generally speaking, when performed under the supervision of a medical doctor (MD), ophthalmologist, podiatrist, surgeon, or other licensed healthcare practitioner a medical assistant is allowed to do the following tasks:

1. **Can** Prepare and file medical records and patient charts

2. **Can** Maintain medical records using standard filing systems
3. **Can** Perform inventory control and ordering supplies
4. **Can** Maintain and adjust medical office equipment
5. **Can** Manage a petty cash drawer
6. **Can** Post service charges and payments
7. **Can** Gather community resources
8. **Can** Prepare and maintain appointment books
9. **Can** Sterilize, wrap and label instruments
10. **Can** Set up the examination room for the next patient
11. **Can** Record body measurements and vital signs
12. **Can** Prepare patients for their physical examinations
13. **Can** Assist with therapeutic procedures
14. **Can** Assist during simple surgical procedures
15. **Can** Prepare and administer medications as ordered
16. **Can** Draw up liquid medications and administer (most of) them as ordered
17. **Can** Collect and preserve bodily fluids, blood, and other specimens
18. **Can** Perform simple STAT screening tests on collected specimens
19. **Can** Answer phones and relay patient's requests and questions
20. **Can** Type business correspondence
21. **Can** Transcribe dictated documents
22. **Can** Repeat and explain doctor's instructions (i.e. patient education)
23. **Can** Write the "S" and the "O" part of the SOAP note
24. **Can** Read laboratory or other results over the phone, but not interpret them
25. **Can** Respond to medical office emergencies, administer CPR and basic first aid
26. **Can** apply a topical numbing agent to the skin, such as an EMLA® patch
27. **Can** Fill out a laboratory requisition slip - and obtain physician's signature
28. **Can** Lay out and set up intravenous infusion therapy (IV) equipment
29. **Can** Place and initiate an IV line except* in states where the Medical Board prohibits it

Examples of What Medical Assistants Are NOT Allowed To Do

1. **Can Not** Independently diagnose or treat patients
2. **Can Not** Assess, plan and evaluate patients, or their care (nor can this ever be delegated)
3. **Can Not** Perform arterial punctures
4. **Can Not** Perform tests that involve the penetration of human tissues except for skin allergy tests and venous and capillary blood collection to obtain a sample for diagnostic laboratory tests
5. **Can Not** Administer intravenous (IV) medications
6. **Can Not** Independently provide medical treatment, analyze test results, advise patients about their condition, or treatment regimen, or perform medical care decision making
7. **Can Not** Administer any anesthetic agents that render a patient unconscious, or semiconscious
8. **Can Not** Independently prescribe or refill medications
9. **Can Not** Practice physical therapy, except technical supportive services, which utilize concepts of physical therapy under the supervision of a licensed healthcare professional
10. **Can Not** Do clinical skills which require healthcare professional licensure and constitute the practice of medicine

Medical Assistants Who Give Injections

There has been a lot of controversy and headlines about medical assistants giving Botox shots, and the law remains fuzzy on this particular issue. Medical assistants in a typical medical office setting are often asked to **administer different types of injections**, such as vaccines, medications, hormones, B12, and intradermal injections like TB skin and allergy testing when ordered and supervised by the physician. In order to do this they must be fully trained and supervised. Medical assistants can give any of these "shots" only if the doctor is present. He/she doesn't have to literally be standing over the medical assistant observing the procedure, but must be present in the office or the building and be reachable at the spur of a moment. Any medical assistant who administers injections without a doctor's orders, or without a doctor present, even if it is to an established patient who had them before, or is on a regular schedule, is in violation of the law.

Medical Assistants and Intravenous Infusion (IV) Therapy

A medical assistant may be asked to lay out equipment, monitor, or inform a patient about IV therapy procedure, which is allowed, however, if asked to *initiate or discontinue IV therapy then it is extremely important to check specific laws and regulations to find out whether this is permitted and deemed within the medical assistant's scope of practice before proceeding. Most State Medical Boards/Boards of Medical Examiners rule that only certified, or licensed professionals and clinicians are allowed to start and discontinue IV therapy lines on patients, which typically is a physician, specially licensed technologist, such as an Emergency Medical Technologist (EMT), LVN/LPN, Registered Nurse (RN), Nurse Practitioner, or Physician Assistant (PA), since it is considered a highly skilled invasive procedure.