Physician Assistant

A Physician Assistant (PA) is a person who works directly with patients, performing many of the same duties that a doctor performs. PA's work with doctors to diagnose health problems and treat patients. A PA might work in Emergency Medicine, Surgery or even Pediatrics, where sick children are treated!

Career Path

Most people who become PA's go to college first and then work in a hospital for a few years. Many work as a nurse or a paramedic. This gives them a lot of experience in healthcare. The training to become a PA lasts a little over two years. PA's must pass a national exam for their Physician Assistant certification.

If you ever have to go to the Emergency Department (ED), you may be treated by a PA. If you come to the ED with a breathing problem such as asthma, you will be treated very quickly. The PA will listen to your lungs with a stethoscope and will probably use a device called an oximeter to see how much oxygen is in your blood. This test takes very little time and does not hurt at all, but it tells the PA something very important. If your blood does not have enough oxygen, the PA will know that your lungs need extra help to do their job. You will be given medicine to relax your throat and lungs and may need to wear an oxygen mask for a while.

Most of the time, children with asthma will feel better quickly when given the right medication. If the asthma attack is very severe, the PA might keep you in the hospital overnight. While in the hospital, nurses help you feel comfortable and check frequently to be sure you are breathing well. Before you leave to go home, the PA will be sure to tell you how to avoid an asthma attack in the future!

Technology Spotlight

The picture on the right shows the type of oximeter that is often found in hospitals. To tell how much oxygen is in your blood, the machine shines a light on the skin of your finger or your earlobe and measures the amount of light that comes through. If your blood has a lot of oxygen, it will be bright red and not much light will get through. If you blood doesn't have enough oxygen, it will be blue or purplish and more light will get through.

Try this to see how light looks as it comes through your skin: In a dark room, cover the front of a flashlight with your hand. Now, turn the flashlight on. Does your hand look red? If you look closely, you might be able to see the veins and arteries in your hand!