CAREER KIT

Medical Assistant Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

How to Become a Medical Assistant

2026-10 edition

Inside: at-a-glance summary · step-by-step path · costs & requirements · 90-day action plan · documents checklist · exams · interview questions · resume bullets · common mistakes · 13-week tracker · resources

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SECTION 1

At a glance

Most medical assistants complete a postsecondary certificate (often 9–12 months) or a two-year associate degree that includes a supervised practicum, then work in doctors' offices, clinics, or hospitals. Most states do not require certification, but many employers prefer it, so most new graduates take a national exam such as the CMA (AAMA), RMA (AMT), or CCMA (NHA). Some people still start with a high school diploma and learn on the job.

Timeline	9 months–2 years
Typical cost	$1,500–$15,000 for most certificate programs; more for an associate degree
Education	Postsecondary certificate or associate degree is typical; some employers train on the job
License	No license in most states; voluntary national certification (CMA, RMA, CCMA); a few states, such as Washington, have their own credential
Median pay	$45,690 per year
Job outlook	+13% (2025–35), much faster than average; about 109,700 openings a year

SECTION 2

Step-by-step path

1. Finish high school or get your GED

Time: Varies

Every medical assisting program and national certification requires a high school diploma or equivalent. Biology, health science, and keyboarding classes help. If you are still in high school, ask whether your district offers a health careers or CTE track that includes medical assisting.

2. Choose a program and check its accreditation

Time: 2–4 weeks

Certificate and diploma programs take about 9–12 months; an associate degree takes about two years and adds general education courses that transfer more easily if you later want nursing or another degree. If you want the CMA (AAMA) credential, pick a program accredited by CAAHEP or ABHES, because only graduates of those programs can sit for that exam. Community colleges are usually the cheapest option.

3. Complete your training and practicum

Time: 9 months–2 years · Cost: $1,500–$15,000 for certificates

Expect coursework in anatomy, medical terminology, pharmacology basics, infection control, vital signs, EKGs, injections, phlebotomy, and front-office tasks like scheduling, insurance, and electronic health records. Accredited programs end with an unpaid externship or practicum in a real clinic. Treat it like a job interview, because many students are hired by their practicum site.

4. Get CPR/BLS certified

Time: 1 day · Cost: $50–$100

Most employers and many programs require a current Basic Life Support (BLS) card from the American Heart Association or the American Red Cross. The class usually takes a few hours and must be renewed every two years.

5. Pass a national certification exam

Time: 4–8 weeks of study · Cost: $125–$250

The best-known credentials are the CMA (AAMA), the Registered Medical Assistant (RMA) from AMT, and the Certified Clinical Medical Assistant (CCMA) from NHA. Each has its own eligibility rules based on your education or work experience. Take the exam soon after you finish your program, while the material is fresh.

6. Check your state's rules

Time: 1–2 weeks

Medical assistants are not licensed in most states, but states limit what tasks you can do, such as injections or X-rays, and a few require a state credential. Washington, for example, requires a Medical Assistant-Certified credential through its Department of Health. Ask your program or state medical board what applies where you live.

7. Apply for medical assistant jobs

Time: 2–8 weeks

Look at physician practices, urgent care centers, outpatient clinics, specialty offices, and hospital systems. Put your certification, clinical skills, and EHR experience near the top of your resume. Large health systems often hire in waves, so set up job alerts and apply early.

SECTION 3

Costs & requirements

Estimated costs (USD)

Item	Low	High	Note
Medical assistant certificate or diploma	$1,500	$15,000	Typical range, varies by school; community colleges are usually at the low end
Associate degree in medical assisting	$6,000	$30,000	Typical range, varies by school; two years including general education
National certification exam	$125	$250	CMA (AAMA) is $125 for members and eligible students/recent grads, $250 for others; AMT RMA is $150; check NHA for the current CCMA fee
BLS/CPR card	$50	$100	Renew every two years
Scrubs, shoes, and supplies	$100	$300	Typical range
Background check, drug screen, immunizations	$50	$250	Typical range; some programs include these in fees
Total	**$7,825**	**$45,900**	

Requirements

Education	A high school diploma or GED is the minimum. Most employers prefer a postsecondary certificate or associate degree in medical assisting, and BLS lists a postsecondary nondegree award as the typical entry-level education.
Certification	Voluntary in most states, but many employers prefer or require it. Common credentials: CMA (AAMA), RMA (AMT), CCMA (NHA), and NCMA (NCCT).
State rules	Varies by state. Most states do not license medical assistants, but some regulate which tasks they can perform. Washington requires a Medical Assistant-Certified credential and accepts exams from AAMA, AMT, NHA, NCCT, and AMCA.
CPR/BLS	A current Basic Life Support card is required by most employers and many training programs.
Health and background checks	Programs and employers usually require immunizations, a TB test, a drug screen, and a criminal background check before clinical work.
Skills	Taking vital signs, patient intake, sterile technique, basic EHR use, clear communication, and staying calm with anxious patients.

SECTION 4

90-Day Action Plan

Tick each box as you finish the task. Do the phases in order; it is fine if a phase takes a little longer.

Phase 1: Choose and start your program

Days 1–30

Goal: Pick an accredited, affordable program and get your paperwork ready.

- ☐ Check your state's rules for medical assistants (tasks allowed, any state credential)
- ☐ Compare three programs on cost, length, accreditation (CAAHEP/ABHES), and externship placement
- ☐ Read 20 local job ads and note which certification (CMA, RMA, CCMA) they ask for
- ☐ Gather immunization records and schedule a TB test if required
- ☐ Apply for FAFSA, Pell Grants, or workforce (WIOA) funding
- ☐ Enroll and set a weekly study schedule

Phase 2: Build clinical skills

Days 31–60

Goal: Get comfortable with the core skills employers check on day one.

- ☐ Master medical terminology with daily flashcards
- ☐ Practice vital signs, patient intake, and charting until they are routine
- ☐ Get your BLS/CPR card
- ☐ Learn the basics of at least one EHR system used in your area
- ☐ Ask your program early about externship sites and request one that hires graduates
- ☐ Start a skills log of procedures you have performed under supervision

Phase 3: Certify and get hired

Days 61–90

Goal: Schedule your certification exam and land interviews.

- [ ] Confirm your eligibility and register for the CMA, RMA, or CCMA exam
- [ ] Take at least three timed practice exams
- [ ] Write a one-page resume that lists clinical and administrative skills
- [ ] Apply to 5–10 jobs per week at clinics, urgent care centers, and health systems
- [ ] Practice answers to the interview questions in this kit
- [ ] Ask your externship supervisor for a reference letter
- [ ] Send thank-you emails within 24 hours of each interview

SECTION 5

Documents checklist

Gather these early. Keep originals in one folder and scans in the cloud.

- ☐ High school diploma or GED
- ☐ Program certificate, diploma, or transcript
- ☐ Certification exam confirmation or certificate
- ☐ BLS/CPR card
- ☐ Immunization records and TB test results
- ☐ Government-issued photo ID
- ☐ Resume and cover letter template
- ☐ Externship evaluation or skills checklist
- ☐ List of 3 professional references
- ☐ State credential application (if your state requires one)

SECTION 6

Exams & how to prepare

CMA (AAMA) Certification Exam

What it is: Multiple-choice exam covering general, administrative, and clinical knowledge. Open only to students and graduates of CAAHEP- or ABHES-accredited medical assisting programs. Recertify every 60 months by exam or continuing education.

How to prepare: 4–8 weeks using the AAMA content outline and practice exams.

Registered Medical Assistant (RMA) by AMT

What it is: Multiple-choice exam on general, administrative, and clinical medical assisting. Several eligibility routes, including graduation from an accredited program, work experience, or military training.

How to prepare: 4–6 weeks using AMT's content outline and practice tests.

Certified Clinical Medical Assistant (CCMA) by NHA

What it is: Clinically focused exam. Eligibility is based on completing a medical assistant training program or having supervised work experience.

How to prepare: 3–6 weeks; NHA sells study guides and practice tests, and many programs include them.

SECTION 7

Interview questions

1. Why do you want to be a medical assistant?

Tip: Talk about patient contact and teamwork, and give one concrete example from training.

2. Walk me through how you room a patient.

Tip: Go step by step: identify the patient, vitals, chief complaint, medications, allergies, and charting.

3. How do you handle a patient who is anxious about a blood draw or shot?

Tip: Show calm communication and when you would ask the nurse or provider for help.

4. What EHR systems have you used?

Tip: Name the system and specific tasks, like charting vitals or scheduling.

5. How do you protect patient privacy?

Tip: Mention HIPAA, logging out of workstations, and not discussing patients in public areas.

6. What would you do if you made an error in a patient chart?

Tip: Explain correcting it per policy and telling your supervisor right away; never hide it.

7. Tell me about a time you handled a busy front desk or full schedule.

Tip: Show prioritizing, staying polite, and keeping the provider informed.

8. Which clinical procedures are you comfortable performing?

Tip: Be honest and specific; say what you have done under supervision during your externship.

9. How do you prevent the spread of infection in an exam room?

Tip: Hand hygiene, cleaning surfaces between patients, and proper disposal of sharps.

10. How would you respond to an angry patient about a long wait?

Tip: Acknowledge, apologize, give a realistic update, and offer options.

11. Are you certified, or when do you plan to test?

Tip: Give a date and the credential; employers like a clear plan.

12. Where do you see yourself in five years?

Tip: Mention a specialty, a lead MA role, or further education such as nursing.

SECTION 8

Resume bullet examples

Adapt these to what you actually did. Use numbers wherever you can.

- Completed a CAAHEP-accredited medical assisting certificate, including a 160-hour clinical externship
- Roomed 20+ patients per shift, recording vital signs, medications, and allergies in the EHR
- Performed venipuncture, EKGs, and injections under provider supervision
- Scheduled appointments and verified insurance for a busy family practice
- Sterilized instruments and maintained exam rooms in line with infection control policies
- Earned CMA (AAMA) certification on the first attempt
- Maintained patient confidentiality in compliance with HIPAA
- Current American Heart Association BLS certification

SECTION 9

Common mistakes to avoid

1. Enrolling in a non-accredited program and later learning you cannot sit for the CMA (AAMA) exam
2. Choosing an expensive private school without comparing community college options
3. Treating the externship as a formality instead of a job audition
4. Waiting months after graduation to take the certification exam
5. Doing tasks your state does not allow medical assistants to perform
6. Letting your BLS card expire
7. Listing duties on your resume without numbers or specific skills

SECTION 10

13-week progress tracker

Fill this in by hand each week.

Week	Focus	Done?	Notes
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			

SECTION 11

Resources, salary & disclaimer

Resources

- **American Association of Medical Assistants (AAMA)**

https://www.aama-ntl.org

- **American Medical Technologists (AMT)**

https://www.americanmedtech.org

- **National Healthcareer Association (NHA)**

https://www.nhanow.com

- **CAAHEP accredited program search**

https://www.caahep.org

- **BLS: Medical Assistants**

https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/medical-assistants.htm

Salary

Bottom 10%	Median	Top 10%
Less than $36,050	**$45,690 per year ($21.97 per hour)**	More than $59,310

Outlook: BLS projects employment of medical assistants to grow 13% from 2025 to 2035, much faster than the average for all occupations, with about 109,700 openings each year. There were about 833,900 medical assistant jobs in 2025.

Source: BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook, May 2025 wage data; projections 2025–35 — https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/medical-assistants.htm

Disclaimer. Requirements vary by state and change over time. Verify with the official sources listed. This guide is not legal or career advice.