CAREER KIT

Ultrasound Technician Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

How to Become an Ultrasound Technician

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

Ultrasound technicians, officially called diagnostic medical sonographers, need at least an associate degree or a postsecondary certificate in sonography, which includes supervised clinical training. Most then earn a professional credential such as ARDMS's RDMS by passing the SPI exam plus a specialty exam. Plan on about 2 years for an associate degree, or 12–18 months for a certificate if you already have healthcare training.

Timeline	1–4 years (associate degree is about 2 years)
Typical cost	$5,000–$50,000+ depending on the program
Education	Associate degree or postsecondary certificate in diagnostic medical sonography; bachelor's degrees also available
License	Professional certification usually expected (ARDMS, CCI); a few states, such as Oregon and North Dakota, license sonographers
Median pay	$96,590 per year
Job outlook	+14% (2025–35), much faster than average; about 6,000 openings a year

SECTION 2

Step-by-step path

1. Build a science foundation

Time: 6 months–1 year

Sonography programs are competitive and usually require prerequisite courses such as anatomy and physiology, college math, physics, and medical terminology. A high school diploma or GED is required. Good grades in prerequisites matter, because many programs rank applicants by GPA.

2. Choose an accredited sonography program

Time: 1–3 months to apply

Associate degrees (about 2 years) are the most common route. Bachelor's degrees take about 4 years, and 12–18 month certificates are usually for people who already have a healthcare degree, such as radiologic technologists or nurses. Choose a program accredited by CAAHEP (programs are reviewed by the JRC-DMS), because graduating from one is the most direct way to qualify for registry exams.

3. Complete classroom and clinical training

Time: 12 months–4 years · Cost: $5,000–$50,000+

You will study anatomy, physiology, ultrasound physics, and scanning protocols, then train in hospitals or clinics under supervision. Clinical rotations are often unpaid and close to full time. Many programs focus on a specialty track, such as general (abdomen and OB/GYN), cardiac (echocardiography), or vascular sonography.

4. Pass the ARDMS SPI exam

Time: 4–8 weeks of study · Cost: $275

The Sonography Principles and Instrumentation (SPI) exam covers ultrasound physics and is required for every ARDMS credential. It has about 110 multiple-choice questions over two hours. Students in accredited programs can often take it before graduating.

5. Pass a specialty exam and earn your credential

Time: 4–8 weeks of study

Pair SPI with a specialty exam to earn a credential: RDMS (abdomen, OB/GYN, breast, and others), RDCS for cardiac, or RVT for vascular. You must pass SPI and the specialty exam within five years of each other. Cardiovascular Credentialing International (CCI) offers alternatives such as the RCS for cardiac sonographers.

6. Get a state license if your state requires one

Time: 2–8 weeks

Most states do not license sonographers, but a few do. According to the Society of Diagnostic Medical Sonography, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Dakota, and Oregon have sonography licensure laws, and the details differ by state. Check your state's medical imaging board before you apply for jobs there.

7. Get BLS certified and apply for jobs

Time: 1–3 months

Employers usually want a current Basic Life Support card. Hospitals, imaging centers, physician offices, and medical labs hire sonographers. Your clinical sites are your best leads, so ask supervisors about openings before you graduate.

SECTION 3

Costs & requirements

Estimated costs (USD)

Item	Low	High	Note
Certificate program (for people with prior healthcare training)	$5,000	$30,000	Typical range, varies by school
Associate degree in diagnostic medical sonography	$10,000	$50,000	Typical range, varies by school; public community colleges are at the low end
Bachelor's degree in sonography	$30,000	$100,000	Typical range, varies by school and residency status
ARDMS SPI exam	$275	$275	Fee listed by ARDMS/Inteleos
Specialty registry exam (ARDMS or CCI)	$250	$400	Typical range; CCI's RCS exam is $365; check inteleos.org for current ARDMS specialty fees
Scrubs, BLS card, background check, immunizations	$200	$600	Typical range
Total	**$45,725**	**$181,275**	

Requirements

Education	At least an associate degree or postsecondary certificate in sonography, with a clinical component. Bachelor's degrees are also available.
Accreditation	Choose a CAAHEP-accredited program when possible. It is the most direct pathway to ARDMS and CCI exam eligibility.
Certification	Not required by federal law, but many employers require or prefer it. ARDMS (RDMS, RDCS, RVT) and CCI (RCS, RVS) are the main credentialing bodies.
State license	Varies by state. Most states do not license sonographers; SDMS lists New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Dakota, and Oregon as states with licensure laws.
BLS/CPR	Employers usually require a current Basic Life Support card.
Physical demands and skills	Standing for long periods, moving patients and equipment, good hand-eye coordination, and clear communication with patients and physicians.

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: Pick a specialty and a program

Days 1–30

Goal: Choose your sonography path and plan a strong application.

- ☐ Decide which specialty interests you: general, cardiac, or vascular
- ☐ List accredited programs near you on the CAAHEP website
- ☐ Compare cost, length, prerequisites, clinical sites, and registry pass rates
- ☐ Check whether your state licenses sonographers
- ☐ Plan or finish prerequisites like anatomy, physics, and college math
- ☐ Ask to shadow a sonographer at a local hospital or imaging center

Phase 2: Apply and prepare

Days 31–60

Goal: Submit competitive applications and get ready for physics.

- ☐ Request transcripts and letters of recommendation
- ☐ Write a personal statement about why you want to be a sonographer
- ☐ Practice for program interviews with the questions in this kit
- ☐ Apply to several programs and for financial aid (FAFSA)
- ☐ Start reviewing ultrasound physics basics for the SPI exam
- ☐ Get your BLS/CPR card

Phase 3: Plan your registry path and career

Days 61–90

Goal: Map out your exams and first job search.

- [ ] Confirm your ARDMS or CCI prerequisite pathway
- [ ] Set a target date to take the SPI exam
- [ ] Pick the specialty exam that matches your training
- [ ] Build a resume listing clinical rotations and scanning experience
- [ ] Connect with clinical supervisors and sonographers on LinkedIn
- [ ] Join the Society of Diagnostic Medical Sonography (SDMS) as a student
- [ ] Apply to sonographer jobs 2–3 months before you graduate

SECTION 5

Documents checklist

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

- ☐ High school diploma or GED and college transcripts
- ☐ Proof of completed prerequisites
- ☐ Program acceptance letter and clinical rotation records
- ☐ Letters of recommendation
- ☐ BLS/CPR card
- ☐ Immunization records, TB test, and background check results
- ☐ ARDMS or CCI application and exam results
- ☐ State license application (if your state requires one)
- ☐ Resume and list of 3 references

SECTION 6

Exams & how to prepare

ARDMS Sonography Principles and Instrumentation (SPI)

What it is: About 110 multiple-choice questions in two hours on ultrasound physics and instrumentation. Required for all ARDMS credentials.

How to prepare: 4–8 weeks with a physics review book and timed practice tests.

ARDMS specialty exams (RDMS, RDCS, RVT)

What it is: Specialty exams such as abdomen, OB/GYN, breast, adult echocardiography, or vascular technology. Pass SPI and a specialty within five years of each other to earn the credential.

How to prepare: 4–8 weeks after or near the end of clinical training, using registry review materials.

CCI Registered Cardiac Sonographer (RCS) and Registered Vascular Specialist (RVS)

What it is: Alternative credentials for cardiac and vascular sonographers from Cardiovascular Credentialing International. Eligibility requires a high school diploma plus an approved education or experience pathway.

How to prepare: 4–8 weeks using CCI's exam overview and review courses.

SECTION 7

Interview questions

1. Why do you want to be a sonographer?

Tip: Be specific: hands-on imaging, patient contact, and problem solving.

2. Why did you choose your specialty?

Tip: Link it to clinical experience or a real interest, not just pay.

3. How do you explain an exam to a nervous patient?

Tip: Use plain words, explain what they will feel, and check for questions.

4. What would you do if a patient asks what the images show?

Tip: Explain that the physician interprets results and will share them; do not diagnose.

5. How do you protect yourself from work-related injuries?

Tip: Mention ergonomics, adjusting equipment, and breaks to prevent strain.

6. Describe a hard scan and how you got diagnostic images.

Tip: Talk about adjusting technique, positioning, and asking for help when needed.

7. How do you handle a heavy schedule with add-on patients?

Tip: Show prioritizing urgent studies and communicating with the team.

8. What infection control steps do you follow?

Tip: Probe cleaning, hand hygiene, and proper covers for invasive probes.

9. Which registry exams have you passed or scheduled?

Tip: Give exact credentials and dates.

10. How do you communicate findings to the radiologist or cardiologist?

Tip: Describe a clear, organized worksheet and noting anything urgent right away.

11. Tell me about a time you made a mistake in clinicals.

Tip: Pick a real, small error and show what you learned.

12. Where do you see yourself in five years?

Tip: Mention adding credentials, a second specialty, or a lead role.

SECTION 8

Resume bullet examples

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

- Graduated from a CAAHEP-accredited diagnostic medical sonography associate degree program
- Passed the ARDMS SPI exam before graduation
- Completed 1,000+ hours of clinical rotations in hospital and outpatient imaging settings
- Performed abdominal, OB/GYN, and small parts exams under supervision
- Prepared technical worksheets and communicated preliminary findings to interpreting physicians
- Followed probe disinfection and infection control protocols
- Explained procedures to patients and positioned them safely for exams
- Current American Heart Association BLS certification

SECTION 9

Common mistakes to avoid

1. Enrolling in a non-accredited program and struggling to qualify for registry exams
2. Underestimating prerequisite grades for competitive programs
3. Putting off the SPI exam until physics is no longer fresh
4. Ignoring ergonomics and developing shoulder or wrist strain
5. Giving patients results or diagnoses, which is the physician's role
6. Not checking state licensing rules before moving
7. Treating clinical rotations as school instead of a job tryout

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

- **ARDMS (Inteleos)**

https://www.inteleos.org

- **Cardiovascular Credentialing International (CCI)**

https://cci-online.org

- **Society of Diagnostic Medical Sonography (SDMS)**

https://www.sdms.org

- **CAAHEP accredited program search**

https://www.caahep.org

- **BLS: Diagnostic Medical Sonographers**

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

Salary

Bottom 10%	Median	Top 10%
Less than $67,820	**$96,590 per year ($46.44 per hour)**	More than $129,370

Outlook: BLS projects employment of diagnostic medical sonographers to grow 14% from 2025 to 2035, much faster than the average for all occupations, with about 6,000 openings each year. There were about 92,200 sonographer jobs in 2025.

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

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