

What Is Family Medicine?



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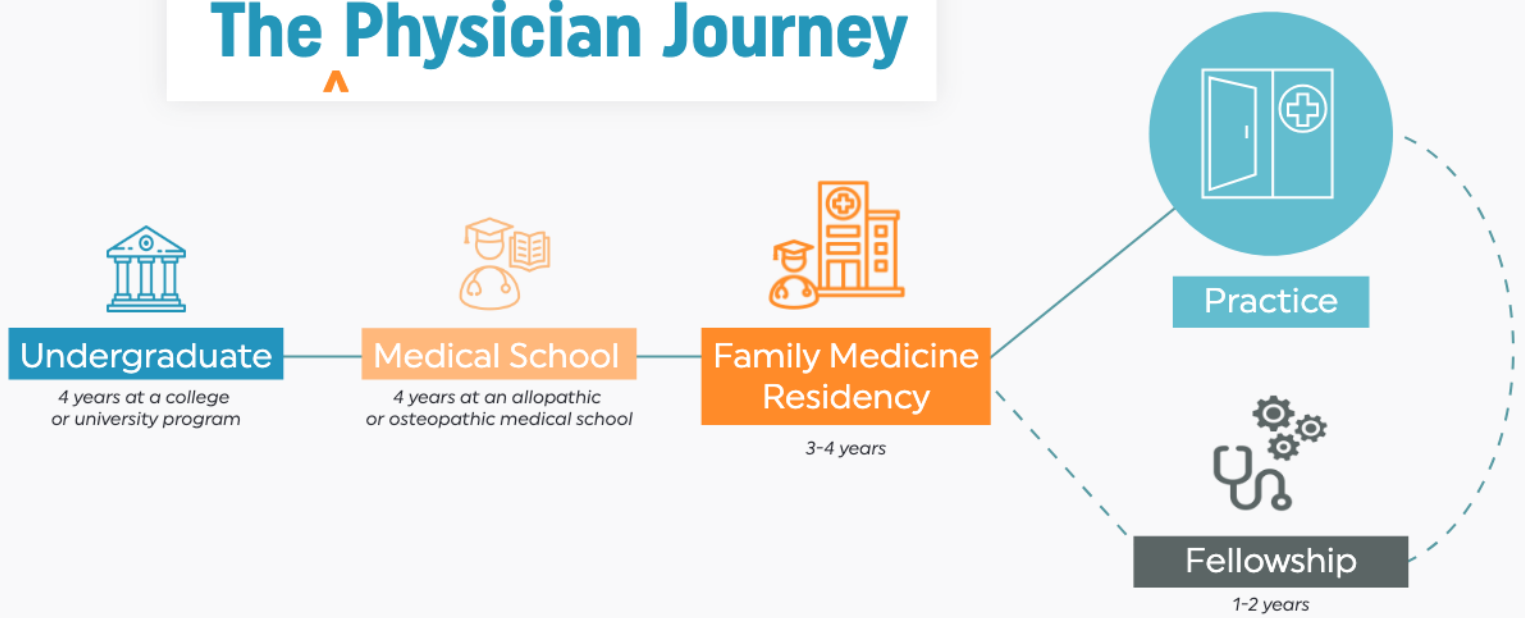
Family medicine is the only medical specialty in which physicians are trained to provide continuing, comprehensive health care for people of all ages, sexes and genders, treating each organ system and every disease entity. No other medical specialty covers the broad range of primary care services that family medicine does. In family medicine, every physician can choose their own professional adventure and lean into being both the physician they want to be and the physician that their community needs.

Family physicians provide first-contact, comprehensive, continuous, coordinated care to everyone, everywhere. They provide the majority of primary care in the United States.^{1,2} *Family medicine is based on a philosophy of caring for the whole person and a continual emphasis on family, community and environmental context, making it the ideal specialty to care for America's most vulnerable and underserved communities.*

Get the Facts! Family Physicians:

- Can care for whole families, whole communities and even whole towns!
- Can practice successfully in a variety of settings because everyone needs and deserves a family physician.
- Practice in communities of all sizes. The geographic distribution of the general U.S. population more closely matches the geographic distribution of family physicians than that of any other medical specialty.
- Are trained to consider community- and population-level impacts and address social determinants of health. Their work and their impact do not end at the door of the exam room.
- Play a key role in guiding patients through the complexities of the health care system to make sure they get the coordinated care and follow-up they need.
- Have the opportunity to grow with their patients and develop long-term relationships. It is richly rewarding to be a trusted partner on a patient's health care journey.

Family Medicine The Physician Journey



Family Medicine Residency Training

After college and medical school, most family physicians complete a three-year family medicine residency program and then go into practice in a wide variety of settings. Some family medicine residency programs offer a fourth year for resident physicians who have a strong interest in a particular area of medicine and want to receive additional training. For example, some residents complete specialized tracks that focus on HIV medicine, obstetrics or procedures.

During residency, family physicians are trained to deliver comprehensive care and perform a broad range of procedures across the lifespan. They learn child and pregnancy care, mental health care, surgical procedures, community medicine, end-of-life care and more. Every family medicine residency program offers something unique, but all of them focus on continuity of care.

Fellowships

Beyond residency, family physicians who want to focus on a particular area of family medicine have numerous options for completing fellowship training. Some fellowships are accredited by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education or lead to a Certificate of Added Qualification from the American Board of Family Medicine. Many other fellowships give family physicians the opportunity to gain additional training. Academic-minded family physicians often complete faculty development fellowships that provide training on adult learning theories and curriculum development.

Selected Fellowships for Family Medicine Graduates

Addiction medicine	Integrative medicine
Adolescent medicine	International/global health
Behavioral medicine	Obstetrics (including surgery)
Clinical informatics	Pain medicine
Community medicine	Preventive medicine
Emergency medicine	Research
Faculty development	Rural medicine
Geriatric medicine	Sleep medicine
Health policy	Sports medicine
HIV/AIDS care	Substance abuse
Hospice/palliative care	Urgent care
Hospitalist medicine	Women's health

Family Medicine Careers

Family physicians are well trained to successfully pursue a wide range of clinical and nonclinical professional roles following residency. Many change their scope of practice at different points in their career to align with their shifting interests and the needs of their community. In clinical practice, family physicians support successful health outcomes by getting to know their patients and where they live, work and play. They also serve as the regular source of care for special populations and underserved areas. In some cases, patients may feel their family physician is the only ally they have in a complex health care system.



Career Options in Family Medicine

Community health center	Office practice
Emergency room	Policy
Faculty development	Public health
Government	Research
Health care system	School or university
Hospital	Teaching center/program
International/global health	Telemedicine
Leadership	University-based health center
Nursing home	Urgent care

As urban centers grow and the U.S. population ages, students pursuing family medicine can anticipate increased demand for family physicians, which will lead to salary growth and more opportunities for leadership roles. They can also expect to see innovation in practice models and an emphasis on a “high-tech, high-touch” approach to care delivery. Health care reform has consistently focused on primary care and will likely continue to do so in the future because primary care has the greatest effect on health care outcomes and costs over the long term.

Join the American Academy of Family Physicians

Looking for a partner in your family medicine journey? Join the AAFP and gain access to resources designed to help you along the way, plus the support and encouragement of thousands of family physicians practicing today. Medical students join for free!

Sign up today at aafp.org.



Plus, anyone can watch our “What is Family Medicine?” video. Check it out here.

References

1. Willis J, Antono B, Bazemore A, et al. The state of primary care in the United States: a chartbook of facts and statistics. October 2020. Accessed December 13, 2023. <https://www.graham-center.org/content/dam/rgc/documents/publications-reports/reports/PrimaryCareChartbook2021.pdf>
2. Rui P, Okeyode T. National Ambulatory Medical Care Survey: 2016 national summary tables. 2016. Accessed December 13, 2023. https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/ahcd/namcs_summary/2016_namcs_web_tables.pdf