

Is a Health Career Right for You?

Before embarking on a health career path, take a few minutes to think about your own abilities, needs, and hopes. Here are some useful questions to ask yourself:

Do You Like to Deal With People?

One of the first questions you should ask yourself is how much you want to deal with people. For instance, it is important for nurses, pediatricians, and occupational therapists to have a warm and caring personality. By contrast, other health careers (like medical lab technology, pathology, or medical illustration) involve little or no personal contact with patients.

Are You Comfortable With Science?

Many (but not all) health careers require you to be a strong science student. All health careers involve some laboratory science, and some programs demand intensive work in the hard sciences (i.e., chemistry, physics, biology).

Are You Prepared to Keep Up with Developments in Your Field?

Good health care practitioners are committed to giving their patients the best care available. That means, in order to keep up with the latest developments in your field, you'll need to continue studying and learning throughout your career.

Are You Comfortable in a Health Care Setting?

Are you prepared to deal with a wide variety of people? In many (but not all) health careers, you may spend much of your time in the company of sick, disabled, or dying people. This will become increasingly common in the near future, as the large "Baby Boomer" generation enters old age.

In terms of a clinical setting, you might work in an HMO, community health center, mobile clinic, long-term care facility, private practice office, or even a patient's home.

You may opt to work in a bustling city or a sleepy suburb -- and if you do, you'll be meeting a legitimate need. However, there's an urgent need for health practitioners in medically under-served areas, which often are in far-flung rural communities or inner-city neighborhoods.

If you would prefer less direct contact with patients, there are numerous other health-related work settings -- including pharmacies, laboratories, medical libraries, and corporate, non-profit or government offices, to name just a few.

You might be part of a small staff or a huge organization, working at the national, regional, state or local level. The possibilities in this field are almost endless.

Are You a Team Player?

Health care is increasingly becoming a group activity, in which a patient's recovery depends on how well each member of the health care team performs his or her specific function - and how well they communicate and collaborate with one another. Even dentists - 70% of whom work in a solo private practice - usually supervise and work closely with several staff members.

What Lifestyle Do You Envision?

How do you feel about facing life-and-death situations on a daily basis? Some (though not all) health careers involve coping with emergencies, working extremely long hours, and shouldering heavy responsibility. What kind of lifestyle do you envision?

How much time do you hope to spend at work, versus at home?

You need to be realistic with yourself: If you don't mind long workdays and are good at handling stress, go ahead -- pursue an ER-style career. But if you'd rather have a job with regular hours and fewer medical crises, there are plenty of other fulfilling health careers.