

Surgical Assistant

Surgical assistants provide aid in exposure, hemostasis, closure, and other intraoperative technical functions that help the surgeon carry out a safe operation with optimal results for the patient. The surgical assistant performs these functions under the direction and supervision of that surgeon and in accordance with hospital policy and appropriate laws and regulations.



Career Description

The surgeon determines the exact position for the best exposure for the surgical procedure, and the surgical assistant carries out this order. The patient's safety and comfort are important considerations. The surgical assistant will ensure that points of pressure are padded, including elbows, heels, knees, eyes, face, and the axillary region. Surgical assistants also verify that circulation is not impaired, and nerves are protected from damage. Surgical assistants and anesthesia personnel discuss the patient's temperature and identify the particular methods that will be implemented to maintain the desired temperature. Surgical assistants are knowledgeable about common patient positions as they relate to the surgical procedure and are able to utilize the necessary equipment (fracture tables, head stabilizers, body stabilizers, C-arm extensions, and other equipment as needed) to provide that position. When the procedure has been completed, surgical assistants evaluate the patient for any possible damage resulting from that position, including assessment of the skin. The surgical assistant reports any abnormal condition to the surgeon and may assist with any treatment and documentation.

The surgical assistant provides visualization of the operative site by appropriately placing and securing retractors, with or without padding; packing with sponges; digitally manipulating tissue; suctioning, irrigating, or sponging; manipulating suture materials (loops, tags, running sutures); and employing the proper use of body mechanics to prevent obstruction of the surgeon's view.

Surgical assistants utilize appropriate permanent or temporary techniques to help achieve hemostasis by

- Clamping and/or cauterizing vessels or tissue
- Tying and/or ligating clamped vessels or tissue
- Applying hemostatic clips
- Placing local hemostatic agents
- Applying tourniquets
- Applying vessel loops, noncrushing clamps, and direct digital pressure

Surgical assistants participate in volume replacement or autotransfusion techniques when appropriate. Surgical assistants employ appropriate techniques to assist with the closure of body planes, including utilizing running or interrupted subcutaneous sutures; utilizing subcuticular closure technique; closing skin as directed by the surgeon; and administering subcutaneously postoperative injections of local anesthetics when directed by the surgeon. Surgical assistants select and apply appropriate wound dressings, including liquid or spray occlusive materials; absorbent material; and immobilizing dressing. Surgical assistants secure drainage systems to tissue.



Employment Characteristics

The majority of surgical assistants work in hospitals, and a number are self-employed.



Salary

According to the National Surgical Assistant Association, the average starting salary for surgical assistants is \$55,000, with an overall average of \$75,000 and upper-range salary between \$120,000 and \$200,000. For more information, refer to www.ama-assn.org/go/hpsalary.



Employment Outlook

There are approximately 5,000 surgical assistants currently working. The forecast for this career is for positive growth due to the increasing demand for surgery.



Educational Programs

Length. Programs are 12-24 months.

Prerequisites. Programs establish prerequisites for entry into a surgical assisting program. However, as stated in the *Standards and Guidelines for the Accreditation of Educational Programs in Surgical Assisting* of the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs (CAAHEP), programs that do not require previous operating room experience or credentials that are specific to operating room practice must include in the program introductory operating room curriculum.

Curriculum. Accreditation standards require didactic instruction and supervised clinical practice. Subject areas include:

- Advanced microbiology
- Advanced pathology
- Surgical pharmacology
- Anesthesia methods and agents
- Bioscience: wound management, wound closure, fluid replacement therapy
- Professional ethics, legal responsibilities, communication, and interpersonal skills
- Role of the surgical assistant in positioning, draping, and monitoring the patient
- Role of the surgical assistant in managing surgical complications and emergencies
- Use and application of equipment and supplies in care of the surgical patient
- Clinical rotation completing 135 documented surgical procedures performing in the role of the surgical assistant to the surgeon



Credentialing

The National Board for Surgical Technology and Surgical Assisting (formerly Liaison Council on Certification for the Surgical Technologist) offers the Certified First Assistant (CST/CFA) credential, and the National Surgical Assistant Association (NSAA) offers a Certified Surgical Assistant (CSA) credential. To be eligible for NBSTSA testing, individuals must be graduates of a CAAHEP-accredited surgical assistant program or a CST with current certification who meets a number of other eligibility requirements. Criteria for eligibility to sit for the certification examination given by the NSAA includes graduates from CAAHEP accredited programs; military trained personnel; foreign trained and US trained medical doctors with surgical training equal to 2,250 hours of surgical assisting; allied health personnel—RN, PA, CFA, SA-C—who have been trained in surgical

assisting and have 2,250 hours of surgical assisting experience in the past 3 years.

Clinical Preceptorship Training

Prerequisite: Certified Surgical Technologist credential.

Description: Completion of 350 documented surgical procedures performing the role of the surgical assistant under the supervision of the surgeon(s) who serve as preceptor(s) and documentation of experience as a surgical assistant for 2 years during the last 4 years. (This describes the National Board of Surgical Technology and Surgical Assisting [NBSTSA] alternate pathway to CFA eligibility but is not a current requirement for accredited surgical assisting programs.)



Inquiries

Careers/Curriculum

Association of Surgical Assistants
6 West Dry Creek Circle, Suite 200
Littleton, CO 80120
800 637-7433 or 303 694-9130
303 694-9169 Fax
www.surgicalassistant.org

National Surgical Assistant Association
2615 Amesbury Road
Winston Salem, NC 27103
888 633-0479 or 336 768-4443
336 768-4445 Fax
www.nsaa.net