

What it's like to specialize in gastroenterology: Shadowing Dr. Park

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Staff News Writer

As a medical student, do you ever wonder what it's like to specialize in gastroenterology? Meet Walter Park, MD, a gastroenterologist and a featured physician in the AMA's "Shadow Me" Specialty Series, which offers advice directly from physicians about life in their specialties. Check out his insights to help determine whether a career in gastroenterology might be a good fit for you.

The AMA's Specialty Guide simplifies medical students' specialty selection process, highlight major specialties, detail training information, and provide access to related association information. It is produced by FREIDA™, the AMA Residency & Fellowship Database®.

Learn more with the AMA about the medical specialty of gastroenterology.

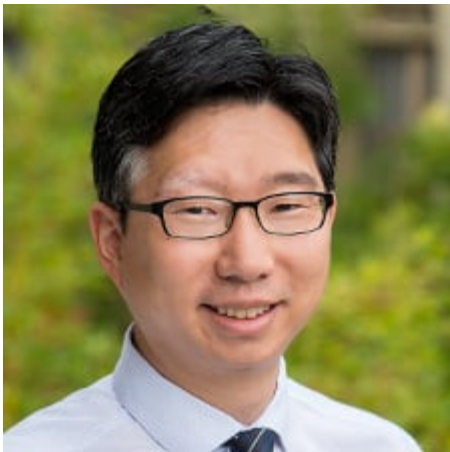
"Shadowing" Dr. Park

Specialty: Gastroenterology.

Practice setting: Hospital in Palo Alto, California.

Employment type: Academic medical center.

Years in practice: 11.



Walter Park, MD

A typical day and week in my practice: A typical day depends on the day of the week, but it usually starts at about 7 a.m., when we review emails and catch up on administrative work before diving into clinic or endoscopic procedures at 7:30 or 8 a.m. If it is a research day, it is typically focused on writing and reading and, of course, answering obligatory emails and checking my Epic inbox for any urgent issues.

A typical workweek is a mixture of clinic and procedures. I do one full day of clinic, seeing patients with mostly pancreatic disorders. I do two full days of endoscopy, mostly in advanced endoscopy—endoscopic ultrasound—as part of my subspecialization in pancreatic disorder. I have two days of research and administration.

The most challenging and rewarding aspects of gastroenterology: Perhaps the most challenging aspect of my practice is the lack of proven therapeutics when patients want quick or definitive solutions. But this can be ameliorated through communication and education about their disease and its chronic nature, and by identifying appropriate strategies to manage the condition.

The most rewarding aspect is when patients feel empowered to manage their condition instead of feeling the condition is managing them.

How life in gastroenterology has been affected by the global pandemic: This specialty spends a significant amount of time doing procedures, many of them elective, so the pandemic has slowed it down. Plus, there are concerns that the pandemic has made patients less likely to complete timely screening colonoscopies, so it may lead them to develop preventable cancers down the road.

We deal with this by educating patients in the risks of putting off preventive care and by reassuring

them that their safety is our No. 1 priority.

The long-term impact the pandemic will have on gastroenterology: The use of video visits is here to stay. It is key for the specialty to embrace it, not just for the convenience it affords patients, but also for its many benefits to physicians, including improved patient engagement, the ability to reach more patients, and lower practice overhead.

Three adjectives to describe the typical adult gastroenterologist: Action-oriented, level-headed and dedicated.

How my lifestyle matches, or differs from, what I had envisioned: Being in an academic practice with protected research time combined with a specialty that is somewhat procedure-based has led to a variety of different skill sets and activities. This variation has been a key to my career fulfillment. It provides a nice balance for pursuing both professional and personal goals.

Skills every physician in training should have for gastroenterology but won't be tested for on the board exam: Good communications skills, good leadership skills to manage your support team, and good hand-eye coordination for procedural competency.

One question physicians in training should ask themselves before pursuing gastroenterology: How much do I enjoy doing procedures? In other words, is the time required to learn how to do these procedures worth the opportunity cost—not pursuing other clinical and research activities?

Books every medical student interested in gastroenterology should be reading:

| *My Own Country: A Doctor's Story*, by Abraham Verghese, MD. It emphasizes the importance of being compassionate with patients.

| *When Breath Becomes Air*, by Paul Kalanithi, MD. This book helped me appreciate the joy of practicing medicine, as well as the unpredictability and fragility of the gift of life.

| *Redefining Health Care: Creating Value-Based Competition on Results*, by Michael E. Porter, PhD, and Elizabeth Olmsted Teisberg, PhD. It can help you understand the economics and incentives that drive health business models and policies.