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Training

What does *bio* mean in the word *biology*? Where does **saliva** come from? What makes cuts stop bleeding? Did you know that your heart beats 100,000 times a day?

Training to be a lab assistant includes learning about the body—the structure of the body and how the body works. But learning about the human body is just the start.



Students discuss ideas and ask questions in class.

What to expect

Training courses for lab assistants have something for everyone. They offer a balance between class time and practical time.

Class time

In class, instructors give lectures on the information that lab assistants need to know. Many instructors come to class with years of experience working in labs or health care. Students have a chance to discuss ideas with their instructors. They have a chance to ask questions about what they read in their textbooks.

Instructors also set up learning opportunities for the students. For example, students do research, make group presentations, watch training videos, and work on individual projects.

Lab time

Lab time means hands-on time. Lab time gives students the chance to use and apply what they learn in class. For example, in class students learn about blood and what it is made of. They learn how blood flows through the body. During lab time, students spin tubes of blood in a centrifuge. They see how the plasma separates from the blood. Students also practise collecting blood samples.

During lab time, instructors offer a safe, caring place where students can develop their skills. Students practise the procedures that they will carry out in the workplace. Instructors observe the students



In lab, students practise how to draw blood.

What do lab assistants practise during lab time?

- hygiene, like handwashing
- collecting blood samples
- using sample-collecting kits
- labelling, sorting, and packing samples
- using lab equipment
- doing basic tests on samples
- communicating with patients and clients

closely. They help the students with their technique. They give the students feedback.

What do lab assistants learn about in class?

- medical language and how to understand it
- bones, tissue, organs, cells, and body fluids like urine and saliva
- the systems of the body and how they work, like how blood flows through the body
- the systems of the body and diseases
- basic math used in the lab
- using lab documents
- working in a safe and healthy way
- communicating with other health care professionals
- dealing with conflict on the job
- the ethics and laws that relate to working in a lab

Practicum

Lab assistant programs often include a practicum. In a practicum, students join a lab team at a workplace. The practicum can last one week, a few weeks, or longer. The length of the practicum depends on the length of the training program.



Staff at the workplace support students on practicum.

Become a specialist

Lab assistants can specialize in many different areas. They learn how to prepare samples for the lab technologists in one or more of these areas:

- **Biochemistry**
Studying chemical reactions in the body
- **Cytology**
Studying cells in the body
- **Histology**
Cutting and staining tissue
- **Histopathology**
Examining tissue that is diseased
- **Immunology**
Studying the immune system
- **Microbiology**
Studying small organisms, such as bacteria and viruses

Lab assistants who specialize get on-the-job training. Some training programs teach lab assistants to work in all the different areas.

During practicum, students observe members of a lab team at work.

Students learn to do basic tasks in the lab. They learn to work with clients and patients. Staff at the workplace and members of the lab team supervise the students. Students are rarely, if ever, left to work on their own.

The practicum helps students learn what it means to be a lab assistant. Students face the challenges that they will deal with when they start working in the lab. They develop their skills, and they gain confidence in their work.

The practicum also helps students get an idea of what kind of lab they would like to work in. For example, some students enjoy lab work more than interacting with patients and clients. Those students might decide to look for a job in a testing lab.

Ask the instructor

Jackie teaches in a full-time lab assistant program at a college. She works in the lab with students. She teaches students about the different kinds of lab work that they will do in each area of the lab.

What helps students have success in their training?

Being organized. How are they going to deal with five courses at one time? How are they going to organize their family time, work time, and study time? How are they going to organize all the books they have to bring to school every day? One student told me she felt like she was carrying four bags of groceries and things were starting to fall out of the bags. I gave her some hints about how to organize her notes, her time. Things went better for her after that.

“When a student’s interest peaks, that’s it! Don’t bother paying me, ‘cause seeing that interest is pay enough.”

What kinds of things do students do in class?

There’s a lot less of the teacher as a “sage on the stage” going on. We get the students to be more active, doing things like research and discussion. We ask for a lot of group work, which is good, because the job itself is about being part of a team. The soft skills are really important. I mean working as a team, communication, being professional, understanding others, getting along with others, having patience. You can learn the technical skills of the job, but lasting in this career means mastering those soft skills.

