

What is a Subspecialist?

Most physicians in the U.S. become “specialists” following training and certification in a primary specialty that is recognized by an ABMS Member Board. (For a complete list of the 36 primary specialties recognized by ABMS Member Boards, see the General Certificate(s) table at <http://www.abms.org/approved.asp>). As the practice of medicine has grown more complex, there has been a need for physicians to subspecialize (i.e., to further concentrate and limit the scope and range of their practices) to better serve their patients.

Subspecialty training requires an additional 1-2 years of education and training beyond what is necessary for a primary specialty. The education and training in these programs is more intensive and confined to a narrower area of medical practice. The certification process for subspecialists is very similar to that of specialists and equally rigorous. Subspecialty certification, like primary certification, is time limited and requires recertification during the course of one’s professional career.

The 24 Member Boards of the ABMS award subspecialty certificates in 88 different areas of medical practice (<http://www.abms.org/approved.asp>). One example of a subspecialist is a medical oncologist. During the course of the initial training as an internal medicine specialist, he/she has been taught to treat a wide variety of medical problems. Upon completion of the training in internal medicine, he/she then studies in greater depth, the treatment of patients with cancer, and satisfies board subspecialty requirements that include passing a rigorous examination in medical oncology. After successfully passing this examination, the medical oncologist specializes in and confines his/her practice to the diagnosis and treatment of cancer. Approximately 25% of physicians certified in a primary specialty by ABMS Member Boards are also certified in a subspecialty.

To read more about the specialties/subspecialties including a brief description of each, review the ABMS brochure “Which Medical Specialist for You” at this link: <http://www.abms.org/Downloads/Which%20Med%20Spec.pdf>.