



## **American Board of Medical Specialties Board Certification Editorial Background**

### **What Does it Mean if a Doctor is Board Certified?**

Doctors who are Board Certified have participated in a voluntary process that involves evaluation of their knowledge and skills beyond what's required for them to become licensed physicians. The standards for Board Certification, such as the type of evaluation and whether additional education and training are required, vary depending on the certifying board.

### **What is the American Board of Medical Specialties?**

The American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) is a not-for-profit organization established in 1933 which is made up of 24 Member Boards that certify physicians in a wide variety of medical specialties. The ABMS does not itself certify physicians, but rather is the umbrella organization that establishes standards and provides information, support and assistance to its Member Boards. A limited number of Member Boards also certify some non-physician specialists such as in the areas of radiology and medical genetics.

### **What are the Standards for Board Certification by an ABMS Member Board?**

Board Certification by an ABMS Member Board is widely recognized by physicians, health care institutions, insurers and patients as the gold standard in Board Certification and an essential tool to judge a physician's knowledge, experience and skills for providing quality health care within a given specialty.

Board Certification by an ABMS Member Board indicates that the physician has:

- Earned a medical degree (MD, DO or other credential approved by the Member Board)
- Completed the accredited education and training
- Provided letters of attestation from the program director and/or faculty
- Fulfilled residency requirements
- Been licensed to practice medicine in at least one U.S. state, territory or Canada
- Passed rigorous tests
- Met other ABMS Member Board-specific qualifications



## **How Many Doctors in the United States are Board Certified by an ABMS Member Board?**

Nearly 85 percent of licensed U.S. physicians are Board Certified by an ABMS Member Board.

## **How Did the Concept of Board Certification Come About?**

Until about a century ago, physicians typically were generalists and did everything from treating the flu and delivering babies to performing surgery. The early and mid 1900s saw the rise of specialization in medicine and physician leaders called for certification to ensure that doctors were well qualified to provide good care in their specialties.

As individual medical specialties matured, professionals in the field formed boards that developed and enforced practice standards. Ophthalmology was the first specialty to form a board in 1917, and in 1933, four boards – Dermatology, Obstetrics and Gynecology, Ophthalmology and Otolaryngology – formed ABMS, originally called the Advisory Board of Medical Specialties. In 1991, the American Board of Medical Genetics became the last board to join.

Today most, if not all, physicians are considered specialists.

## **How Many Medical Specialties are Covered by ABMS Member Boards?**

The vast majority of medical specialties are represented by the 24 ABMS Member Boards. These specialties and subspecialties have met various rigorous qualifications, including a residency and fellowship training program that follows the standards set by the Accreditation Council of Graduate Medical Education (ACGME).

Most of the Member Boards encompass subspecialties. For instance, the American Board of Internal Medicine (ABIM) includes 19 subspecialties, ranging from the treatment of cardiovascular disease to sports medicine. The number of ABMS Member Board specialties undoubtedly will increase as medicine continues to evolve and new subspecialties are created to focus on particular aspects of patient care.

The 24 Member Boards that make up ABMS include:

- American Board of Allergy and Immunology
- American Board of Anesthesiology
- American Board of Colon and Rectal Surgery
- American Board of Dermatology
- American Board of Emergency Medicine



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*Higher standards. Better care.®*

American Board of Medical Specialties  
222 North LaSalle Street, Suite 1500  
Chicago, IL 60601  
T: (312) 436-2600  
F: (312) 436-2700

[www.abms.org](http://www.abms.org)

American Board of Family Medicine  
American Board of Internal Medicine  
American Board of Medical Genetics  
American Board of Neurological Surgery  
American Board of Nuclear Medicine  
American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology  
American Board of Ophthalmology  
American Board of Orthopaedic Surgery  
American Board of Otolaryngology  
American Board of Pathology  
American Board of Pediatrics  
American Board of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation  
American Board of Plastic Surgery  
American Board of Preventive Medicine  
American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology  
American Board of Radiology  
American Board of Surgery  
American Board of Thoracic Surgery  
American Board of Urology

ABMS also partners with other organizations to promote the goal of higher standards and better care. These organizations, which are not Member Boards, share a like focus on improving the quality of medical education and the physician accreditation process and are called Associate Members.

ABMS Associate Members include:

Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education  
Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education  
American Hospital Association  
American Medical Association  
Association of American Medical Colleges  
Council of Medical Specialty Societies  
Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates  
Federation of State Medical Boards of the United States  
National Board of Medical Examiners

### **How Many Different Board Certifications are Held by the ABMS Member Boards?**

Today ABMS Member Boards issue over 150 general specialty and subspecialty certificates. (Click [here](#) for a chart of ABMS Member Boards and the certificates that



are offered by each.) As medicine advances and patients demand increasingly sophisticated treatments and better health outcomes, specialties will continue to increase in number. ABMS continuously receives and reviews applications for new specialty and subspecialty certificates.

### **Can Doctors Become Board Certified in More than One Specialty?**

Many doctors have a general specialty Board Certification, as well as one or more subspecialty Board Certifications. For instance, a doctor might hold a general Board Certification in Psychiatry as well as two subspecialty Board Certifications, in Addiction Psychiatry and Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. In addition, a physician can be Board Certified by more than one Member Board. For example, a doctor can be Board Certified by the American Board of Pediatrics as well as the American Board of Allergy and Immunology.

### **In Addition to ABMS Member Boards, What Other Medical Boards Provide Board Certification for Physicians?**

There are about 200 other certifying medical boards, and while many may employ a rigorous Board Certification process, many are self-designated and do not require the high standards, training and testing that are the hallmarks of Board Certification by an ABMS Member Board. Other boards also may not require verification that doctors continue to keep up their skills and knowledge and stay current with advances in their specialty, a process called Maintenance of Certification that ABMS and its Member Boards have developed.

### **What is ABMS Maintenance of Certification®?**

ABMS Maintenance of Certification® (ABMS MOC®) is the most recent advance in the Board Certification process. Like medicine and science, Board Certification is evolving. Originally, the physician passed a rigorous one-time exam and was considered Board Certified for life. Beginning in the 1970s, individual ABMS Member Boards began implementing time-limited Board Certification; physicians had to pass the certification test every six to 10 years (depending on the board) to become recertified. But even this requirement seemed insufficient given the increasing pace of research and technological advances and the drive to improve patient care and safety.

ABMS MOC replaces recertification and assures that the physician is committed to lifelong learning and competency in a specialty and/or subspecialty by requiring ongoing measurement of six core competencies, including:

- Professionalism



- Patient Care and Procedural Skills
- Medical Knowledge
- Practice-based Learning and Improvement
- Interpersonal and Communication Skills
- Systems-based Practice

These were adopted by ABMS and ACGME in 1999.

These six core competencies are continually measured in a variety of ways, some of which vary according to the specialty, and are incorporated by all Member Boards into a four-part process that is designed to keep Board Certification continuous:

- *Part I: Licensure and Professional Standing* – Holding a valid, unrestricted medical license in at least one U.S. state, territory or in Canada.
- *Part II: Lifelong Learning and Self-Assessment* – Participating in continual educational and self-assessment programs that meet specialty specific standards set by the Member Boards. This can include everything from rigorous take-home tests to continuing medical education to providing specific information about new treatments and standards of care.
- *Part III: Cognitive Expertise* – Proving medical and practice-related knowledge through regular, formal examination.
- *Part IV: Practice Performance Assessment* – Being continually evaluated to assess care compared to peers and national standards and then improving care based on findings and recommendations. This can be achieved through peer and patient surveys, patient chart reviews by objective sources, etc.

Some physicians were Board Certified before their Member Boards instituted time-limited Board Certification. They are “grandfathered” and not required to continually undergo the recertification or Maintenance of Certification process, although many choose to do so.

### **How Does Board Certification Differ from Licensing?**

A doctor must have a license to legally practice medicine but need not be Board Certified. There are other ways that Board Certification and licensing differ.

- *Licensing*: Doctors are licensed by the medical board of the state – or U.S. territory or Canadian province – in which they practice medicine. They must have a license for each state in which they practice. A doctor is not licensed in a particular medical specialty; the license indicates that the doctor has met minimum competence requirements to diagnose and treat patients.



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To obtain a medical license, a doctor must complete medical school and postgraduate training and pass an exam. Applicants also must provide details about work history, any arrests and convictions and provide details about past medical history that may affect their ability to practice. Once licensed, a physician's competence and professional conduct is monitored by the state medical board which also typically requires participation in continuing medical education (CME) credits every several years. The required number of CME credits is determined by the state, and credits can be earned in a number of ways, such as attending a lecture or reading or listening to CME-designated material and then taking a test.

- **Board Certification:** Board Certification is a voluntary process and is awarded to the doctor in an individual specialty or specialties; doctors who want to be Board Certified in multiple specialties must undergo the process for each of them. Unlike licensing, Board Certification is granted by independent boards – not government-regulated boards – and is not connected to the state or territory where the doctor practices.

### **Can Board Certification be Revoked?**

ABMS Member Boards may revoke certification if a doctor's license has been revoked. Also, Board Certification expires for those physicians who do not successfully undergo the recertification process every six to 10 years (depending on specialty). Those physicians are not recognized as currently being Board Certified.

### **How Can Patients Find Out if a Physician is Board Certified by an ABMS Member Board?**

ABMS maintains a database of nearly 800,000 physicians. Patients can find out if a physician is Board Certified by an ABMS Member Board by visiting [CertificationMatters.org](http://CertificationMatters.org) or by calling toll-free 1-866-ASK-ABMS.