

# Comparing MD and DO Programs

There are two types of degree programs to become a physician in the U.S.—an MD (allopathic) degree and a DO (osteopathic) degree. Most people are more familiar with MD physicians, most likely because over 93 percent of physicians in the United States have MD degrees. However, it has been projected that by 2020 there will be over 100,000 practicing DO physicians, making up 14% of the physician workforce.

## Similarities

Both MD and DO physicians utilize scientifically-accepted methods of diagnosis and treatment, including the use of prescription drugs and surgery. Educational requirements are similar. Both degrees require four years of medical school and a residency program of three to seven years. In most instances, DO and MD physicians are examined by the same state licensing board, therefore licensure for both are based on the same requirements and the same or comparable examinations. Both types of physicians are licensed to practice all phases of medicine in every state in America, and both are found in every specialty of medicine. The premedical pathway is identical for both allopathic and osteopathic schools, requiring premedical coursework (which varies slightly from school to school), the MCAT, and a bachelor's degree.

## Differences

The differences between osteopathic and allopathic degrees are centered on the basic philosophy of osteopathy. Osteopathic philosophy focuses on a holistic approach to practicing medicine, meaning treating the patient as a whole—not just the symptoms or injuries. The concept of “mind, body, spirit” is very commonly cited in the holistic philosophy of osteopathic medical education. With this philosophy comes the emphasis that structure determines function and that all the body systems are interconnected, therefore the musculoskeletal system reflects and affects the condition of all the other systems. Osteopathic schools require up to 200 hours of manipulation training on top of the medical coursework, demonstrating the emphasis placed on the musculoskeletal system. This training teaches students manual therapy and manipulation techniques, adding another tool to traditional forms of diagnosis and treatment to effectively care for patients. Other than teaching osteopathic manipulative medicine, the medical school curriculum for an MD and DO is virtually indistinguishable.

Around 60 percent of DO physicians practice in primary care (family medicine, internal medicine, OB/GYN, and pediatrics) whereas the majority of MD physicians are in non-primary care specialties. There are MD and DO physicians in different environments all over the country. DO schools use a different application service called AACOMAS.

MD and DO students and residents take different licensure exams, but both are important in determining factors for acceptance to residency programs. MD students take the United States Medical Licensing Exam (USMLE), while DO students take the Comprehensive Osteopathic Medical Licensing Examination (COMLEX).

Refer to the MSAR and [www.aamc.org/students/start.htm](http://www.aamc.org/students/start.htm) for more information regarding allopathic medicine or the *Osteopathic Medical College Information Book* and [www.aacom.org](http://www.aacom.org) for more information regarding osteopathic medicine.