



Education and Training: Family Physicians versus Naturopaths

Naturopaths—also known as “Doctors of Naturopathy,” “Doctors of Natural Medicine,” “Naturopathic Physicians,” and the like—receive their education typically through a four-year degree program that confers a Doctorate in Naturopathy (ND) or Doctorate in Naturopathic Medicine (NMD). Currently, there are four institutions in the United States—Bastyr University, National College of Natural Medicine, Southwest College of Naturopathic Medicine, and the University of Bridgeport—accredited by the Council on Naturopathic Medical Education (CNME), the only accrediting organization recognized by the US Department of Education. Naturopathic medicine schools do not require students to satisfactorily pass an entrance exam, such as the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) or Graduate Record Examination (GRE). CNME requires the course of study provided at these institutions be at 4,100 total clock hours in length.

This figure includes clinical education clock hours beginning in the third year of naturopathic study. At least 1,200 clinical clock hours are required, 60 percent of which (720) hours must be in direct patient care. Graduates of naturopathic degree programs are not required to undergo post-graduate training, like the residency required of medical school graduates. Optional 1 year programs are offered by some institutions. The University of Bridgeport, for example, offers a program that includes from 535 to 1,035 total hours of direct patient contact and didactic learning.

Family Physicians receive their education typically through a four-year degree program at one of the 130 accredited medical schools in the United States. Students must pass the Medical College Admissions Test for entrance into medical school. In 2005, the average score of matriculants was 30.2 of a possible 45. Medical students spend nearly 9,000 hours in lectures, clinical study, lab and direct patient care. The overall training process begins with medical school and continues through residency. During their time in medical school, students take two “step” exams, called the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE), and must take core clerkships, or periods of clinical instruction. Passing both exams and the clerkships grants students the Medical Doctor (MD) degree, which entitles them to start full clinical training in a residency program.

Family medicine residency programs, which are accredited by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME), require three years of training. As with other specialties, family medicine residency programs have specific requirements with certain numbers of hours that must be completed for board certification. They are designed to provide integrated experiences in ambulatory, community and inpatient environments during three years of concentrated study and hands-on training.

The first year of residency, called the internship year, is when the final “step” of the USMLE (Step 3 exam) is taken. During their three years of training, residents must meet the program requirements for both residency education in family medicine and certification by the American Board of Family Medicine (ABFM). Specific requirements for family medicine residency training vary by program. After three “program years” of training are completed and all requirements are met, residents are eligible to take the certification exam by the ABFM. Toward the end of residency, physicians also apply for licensure from their state medical boards, which determines where they can practice as a board-certified family physician. Although each state is different in their requirements for initial medical licensure, it is a necessity that physicians pass Step 3 of the USMLE.

The below tables offer a side-by-side comparison of the education and training involved in becoming a family physician versus the requirements to become a naturopath.

Degrees Required and Time to Completion

	Undergraduate Degree	Entrance Exam	School	Residency	Residency Completion Time
Family Physician (MD or DO)	Standard 4-year BA/BS	Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT)	4 years	REQUIRED	3 years
Naturopath (ND or NMD)	Standard 4-year BA/BS	None Required	4 years	OPTIONAL	1 year

Medical/Professional School and Residency/Post-Graduate Hours for Completion

	Lecture Hours (Pre-Clinical Years)	Study Hours (Pre-Clinical Years)	Combined** Hours (Clinical Years)	Residency Hours	TOTAL HOURS
Family Physician	2,700	3,000	6,000	9,000 – 10,000	20,700 – 21,700
Naturopath***	1,500	1,665	2,600	535 – 1,035	5,505 – 6,485
DIFFERENCE	1,200	1,335	3,400	8,465 – 8,965	15,195 – 15,215

*Council on Naturopathic Medical Education CNME standards were used for this comparison.

**Clinical and lecture hours

***Naturopath “Lecture Hours” and “Combined Hours” are averaged across publicly-available curricula advertised on the web sites of the four CNME-accredited institutions of naturopathic study (Bastyr University, National College of Natural Medicine, Southwest College of Naturopathic Medicine, and the University of Bridgeport).