

Choosing pathology – making your decision

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Choosing a specialty can be very challenging, but it is one of the most important things you will do in medical school. There are many considerations that may factor into your specialty choice, such as:

- Intellectual interest
- Sense of fulfillment
- Patient population
- Desired practice setting
- Lifestyle, both in residency and beyond
- Compensation

Even if you have a strong interest in pathology, it can feel particularly difficult to commit to this field, as it is significantly different from other specialties. Here are some unique aspects of the field to consider:

- *There is almost no patient contact.* While some physicians might see this as a benefit, others would disagree! However, while pathologists rarely deal with patients, they frequently interface with other doctors – particularly surgeons, radiologists, and oncologists. It is essential to have great communication skills, and extroverts are definitely not precluded from being happy pathologists.
- *Work hours are 8-5.* Well, maybe not exactly, depending on your practice. However, pathology practice hours are very regular compared to other fields of medicine, and attendings enjoy a lot of autonomy when it comes to when they sign out cases. Attending pathologists take call from home, and typically only come in after hours if there is an intraoperative consult (frozen sections). Many other issues can be handled over the phone.
- *The learning curve is steep.* Many medical students don't complete pathology rotations, and medical school pathology courses don't prepare you to work up cases. Therefore, the vast

majority of learning happens in residency. The amount of time you'll need to spend reading outside of work is probably among the highest of any specialty.

- *Grossing can be, well...gross.* As a resident, you'll learn how to dissect specimens in order to produce slides that show you the most pertinent information about a case. Typically, residents learn from pathology assistants who are experts at grossing. While this is a critical skill to learn in pathology, many residents dislike this part of training. Thankfully, most pathologists do not gross beyond residency.

Ultimately, you need to be able to picture yourself as a pathologist in order to know if it is the right field for you. Doing a pathology rotation is ideal for getting a sense of whether you would like the specialty.

Below are some resources that discuss additional pros and cons of the field:

- [Top 5 Reasons To Be a Pathologist](#)
- [What It's Like to Specialize in Pathology](#)
- [Why You Should Consider My Specialty](#)
- [Is Pathology its Own Worst Enemy?](#)
- [What influences med students to choose pathology?](#)

Resources for the new pathology trainee

One of the biggest challenges as a pathology trainee is making sure you are staying on track with building your knowledge base. General advice is to let your clinical experiences guide your studying - i.e. to "read around your cases". For some learners, connecting an esoteric topic to a concrete case can help to make the learning stick. However, there are so many resources available that creating an effective study strategy can become overwhelming. Here are a few resources that come highly recommended to pathology trainees, geared towards the first few years of residency:

Books:

1. **The Practice of Surgical Pathology: A Beginner's Guide to the Diagnostic Process by Diana Weedman Molavi:** This book is really helpful for getting a broad overview of each subfield of pathology. It is broken into subspecialty segments and covers a lot of the basic questions you'll want to be able to answer when starting at a bench.
2. **Rosai and Ackerman's Surgical Pathology:** One of the most popular surgical pathology textbooks – it describes in detail nearly every pathological lesion you will encounter. It's written in an approachable way and is generally used more as a study tool than a quick reference.
3. **Quick Reference Handbook for Surgical Pathologists by Rekhtman and Bishop:** This is one of the most recommended resources by senior residents and attendings. It is a really high-yield reference book that contains tons of useful charts, diagrams, and lists. It explains immunohistochemical staining patterns, lists common molecular findings, summarizes grading schemes, and contains many other useful visuals.

Websites:

1. [ExpertPath](#): While the information in ExpertPath is not comprehensive, this is a great website for quickly refreshing your knowledge on an entity. It also has a feature that allows you to compare several entities, which can be helpful when constructing a differential diagnosis.
2. [WHO Classification of Tumors](#): This is available in book form as well, but the website is much easier and faster to use. It includes descriptions of every neoplastic entity with high-quality images and some helpful tables. Descriptions are brief, but it is great for getting a quick understanding of important features of a lesion.
3. [Pathology Outlines](#): This website is controversial, as each page is written by an author from the pathology community. Therefore, quality can vary substantially. Nevertheless, it is particularly helpful for looking at representative images of a lesion or for getting a sense for common diagnostic pitfalls.
4. [Kurt's Notes](#): This website was designed by UC Davis pathologist Dr. Kurt Schaberg. He distills information down into digestible charts and tables that are really easy to understand, and he covers most subspecialties.
5. [PathElective](#): Designed initially as a resource for trainees during the pandemic, this website is filled with useful videos and articles. It serves as a great introduction to each subspecialty of pathology.

Question banks:

1. [PathPrimer](#): Senior residents have remarked that PathPrimer questions tend to be a little esoteric even compared to board questions. However, when used as a study tool, it can be very helpful. The answers to each question are explained in detail, with several important teaching points in each. Wrong answers are also thoroughly explained.
2. [ASCP Resident Question Bank](#): These banks are much more limited, but the quality of questions is similar to that of PathPrimer.

**Many residency programs purchase some or all the paid resources for their trainees, so ask before you spend your book fund!