

What is a Veterinarian?

Veterinarians are licensed healthcare professionals who diagnose, treat, and prevent disease and injury in animals. They are trained in a wide range of medical disciplines, including anatomy, physiology, pharmacology, surgery, and pathology, allowing them to provide comprehensive care across many different species. Veterinarians work with companion animals such as dogs and cats, large animals such as livestock, and in some cases exotic, wildlife, or laboratory animals.

In clinical practice, veterinarians are responsible for performing physical examinations, diagnosing illnesses, ordering and interpreting diagnostic tests, prescribing medications, and performing surgical procedures. They also play a critical role in preventive care by administering vaccinations, conducting routine wellness exams, and educating pet owners on proper nutrition, behavior, and long-term health management. In addition to medical knowledge, veterinarians must possess strong communication and interpersonal skills, as they work closely with animal owners to explain diagnoses, treatment plans, and sometimes difficult decisions regarding care.

Veterinarians earn a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) degree after completing a professional program that typically follows a bachelor's degree. Veterinary education is rigorous and includes both classroom instruction and extensive clinical training. After earning their degree, graduates must pass a national licensing exam in order to practice.

The veterinary profession offers a wide range of career paths beyond traditional clinical practice. While many veterinarians work in private clinics treating companion animals, others may work in large animal or mixed practices, zoos, aquariums, or wildlife conservation settings. Veterinarians may also pursue careers in research, public health, food safety, pharmaceuticals, or government agencies, where they contribute to disease prevention, food supply safety, and biomedical advancements.

Additionally, veterinarians have the opportunity to specialize in specific areas of medicine through advanced training. Specialties include fields such as surgery, emergency and critical care, oncology, dermatology, cardiology, and exotic animal medicine. These specialties often require additional internship and residency training and allow veterinarians to develop expertise in more complex areas of animal healthcare.

Veterinary medicine is a diverse and rewarding profession that combines scientific knowledge, clinical skills, and a passion for working with animals. However, it also requires resilience, critical thinking, and the ability to manage emotionally challenging situations, including treating severely ill animals and supporting owners through difficult decisions.

Salary and Job Outlook

The following statistics provide an overview of physician salary, education requirements, and job outlook in the United States based on recent data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Quick Facts: Veterinarians	
2024 Median Pay ?	\$125,510 per year \$60.34 per hour
Typical Entry-Level Education ?	Doctoral or professional degree
Work Experience in a Related Occupation ?	None
On-the-job Training ?	None
Number of Jobs, 2024 ?	86,400
Job Outlook, 2024–34 ?	10% (Much faster than average)
Employment Change, 2024–34 ?	8,300

The median annual salary for veterinarians is approximately \$125,510, reflecting the high level of education and training required for the profession. Veterinarians must complete a doctoral or professional degree (DVM), which is followed by extensive clinical training during veterinary school. Although no additional work experience is required prior to entry, most students gain significant hands-on experience with animals before applying.

The job outlook for veterinarians is projected to grow by approximately 10%, which is considered much faster than average. This growth is driven by increasing pet ownership, advancements in veterinary medicine, and a greater emphasis on animal health and welfare. In addition, there is continued demand for veterinarians in areas such as food safety, public health, and livestock care, particularly in rural and underserved regions.

While the profession offers strong job stability and meaningful work, salary can vary depending on factors such as type of practice, geographic location, and level of experience.

Types of Veterinary Careers

Veterinary medicine offers a wide range of career paths, allowing individuals to work with different animal populations and in various professional settings. The type of veterinary career a person chooses can influence their daily responsibilities, work environment, lifestyle, and salary.

Small Animal Practice	Large Animal Practice	Mixed Practice	Specialized Fields
Focus on dogs, cats, and other companion animals	Focus on livestock such as cattle, horses, and sheep	Combination of small and large animal care	Advanced areas of veterinary medicine
Typically work in private clinics or animal hospitals	Often travel to farms or work in rural settings	Flexible work environment	May work in specialty hospitals or referral centers
Provide preventive care, diagnostics, and surgery	Focus on herd health, reproduction, and disease prevention	Variety of cases and species	Includes surgery, oncology, dermatology, and cardiology

Small Animal Practice	Large Animal Practice	Mixed Practice	Specialized Fields
Most common type of veterinary practice	High demand in rural and agricultural areas	Broad skill set required	Requires additional training (internship/residency)

In addition to general practice, veterinarians may also pursue careers outside of traditional clinical settings. These include working in research, public health, government agencies, pharmaceutical companies, or wildlife and conservation organizations. Some veterinarians work in zoos or aquariums, while others contribute to food safety and disease prevention at a population level.

Specialized fields of veterinary medicine often require additional training through internships and residency programs, but they allow veterinarians to develop expertise in specific areas and often involve more complex and advanced cases. The diversity of career paths within veterinary medicine allows individuals to choose a field that aligns with their interests, lifestyle preferences, and long-term career goals.

Education & Requirements to Become a Veterinarian

Step 1: Pick a Major

During undergraduate study, students may major in any discipline provided they complete the required prerequisite coursework for veterinary school. Science-based majors often incorporate many of the common prerequisites into their curriculum, which can simplify academic planning, but they are not required.

Each veterinary school establishes its own prerequisite requirements and minimum grade standards. Most programs expect strong academic performance, typically with a minimum GPA around 3.0, though competitive applicants often have higher GPAs. Because requirements vary, students should research potential programs early and begin developing a list of target schools by their sophomore year.

At Salisbury University, students interested in veterinary medicine often major in Biology, Chemistry, or related science fields. Below are common veterinary school prerequisites along with their corresponding Salisbury course names:

Courses	Salisbury equivalent
General Bio w/ lab (2 semesters)	BIOL 201 and BIOL 202
General Chemistry w/ lab (2 semesters)	CHEM 121 and CHEM 122
Organic Chemistry w/ lab	CHEM 221
Biochemistry	CHEM 417
Physics I & II w/ lab	PHYS 121 (algebra based) or PHYS 221 (calc based) & PHYS 123 (algebra based) or PHYS 223 (calc based)
English	ENGL 103
Recommended Courses	
Organic Chemistry II	CHEM 222
Genetics	BIOL 360 or BIOL 370
Anatomy & Physiology I & II	BIOL 215 and BIOL 216
Cell Biology	BIOL 350

** Prerequisite requirements vary by program; schools may require some, all, or additional courses beyond those listed.*

Regarding GPA, students should also be aware that centralized application systems may calculate GPA differently than their undergraduate institution (e.g., repeated courses may not replace previous grades).

Step 2: Gain Animal and Veterinary Experience

Veterinary schools place a strong emphasis on hands-on experience working with animals. Unlike medical school, applicants are expected to accumulate **extensive animal and veterinary experience hours** prior to applying.

There are two main types of experience:

Veterinary Experience (under supervision of a veterinarian):

- Shadowing a veterinarian
- Working or volunteering in a veterinary clinic
- Assisting with exams, treatments, or procedures

Animal Experience (not necessarily under a veterinarian):

- Animal shelters or rescue organizations
- Farms or livestock operations
- Zoos, aquariums, or wildlife centers
- Pet boarding, grooming, or training facilities

Many successful applicants accumulate **hundreds to thousands of hours** of combined experience. These experiences demonstrate commitment to the field and help students develop animal handling skills and an understanding of veterinary medicine.

At Salisbury University, students can gain experience through:

- Local veterinary clinics in the Salisbury area
- Animal shelters such as the Humane Society or local rescue groups
- Farms and agricultural settings on the Eastern Shore
- Volunteer opportunities through campus organizations such as SU Serves

Students are encouraged to begin gaining experience early and remain consistent throughout their undergraduate career. Long-term involvement in fewer activities is often more valuable than short-term participation in many roles.

Step 3: Standardized Exam

Some veterinary schools require applicants to submit scores from the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), while others have made the exam optional or no longer require it. Because policies vary widely, students should carefully review each program's requirements.

The GRE assesses:

- Verbal reasoning
- Quantitative reasoning
- Analytical writing

Students who need to take the GRE typically do so during their junior year or early senior year. Preparing in advance and allowing time for retesting, if needed, can help improve scores.

While not all programs require the GRE, strong performance can enhance an application, particularly for competitive schools or applicants with lower GPAs.

Students at Salisbury University can utilize academic resources, faculty guidance, and peer study groups to support exam preparation.

Step 4: Letters of Recommendations

Most veterinary schools require 3–4 letters of recommendation. These letters provide admissions committees with insight into an applicant's academic ability, work ethic, and readiness for veterinary school.

Many programs prefer letters from:

- A licensed veterinarian (strongly recommended)
- Science professors
- Employers or supervisors in animal-related roles

It is especially important for applicants to obtain a letter from a veterinarian, as it demonstrates direct exposure to the profession.

At Salisbury University, students are encouraged to build relationships with faculty through office hours, research opportunities, and smaller class settings. Strong connections with professors and supervisors can result in more detailed and personalized letters of recommendation.

Students should request letters well in advance and provide recommenders with materials such as resumes, personal statements, and summaries of experiences.

Step 5: Apply to Veterinary School

Most veterinary schools participate in the centralized application system VMCAS, which allows students to submit one primary application to multiple programs.

Through VMCAS, applicants must submit:

- Official transcripts from all colleges attended
- Documentation of animal and veterinary experience hours
- Letters of recommendation
- Personal statement
- Standardized test scores (if required)

The personal statement is a key component of the application and allows students to explain their motivation for pursuing veterinary medicine and highlight meaningful experiences.

Applications typically open in the spring, and many schools use rolling admissions. Applying early can significantly improve an applicant's chances of receiving an interview.

Because the application process is detailed and time-intensive, students should begin preparing early by tracking experience hours, building relationships for letters of recommendation, and drafting application materials.

Students at Salisbury University can utilize pre-health advising resources to review application materials and ensure they are meeting all requirements before submission.

Timeline to Become a Veterinarian

The path to becoming a veterinarian requires a significant time commitment and involves multiple stages of education and training. While individual timelines may vary, most students follow a general progression similar to the outline below:

- **Undergraduate Education (4 years):**
Students complete a bachelor's degree while fulfilling prerequisite coursework for veterinary school and gaining animal and veterinary experience.
- **Veterinary School (4 years):**
Students earn a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) degree. The first years typically focus on classroom-based learning in subjects such as anatomy, physiology, and pharmacology, followed by clinical training in veterinary settings.
- **Licensure:**
After graduating, students must pass a national licensing exam in order to practice as a veterinarian.
- **Optional Internship (1 year):**
Some graduates choose to complete an internship to gain additional clinical experience and strengthen their skills.
- **Residency (3–4+ years, optional):**
Veterinarians who wish to specialize in areas such as surgery, emergency and critical care, or oncology must complete a residency program.

Overall, the process typically takes **8 or more years of education and training**, with additional time required for those pursuing specialization.

How Competitive is Veterinary School?

Admission to veterinary school is highly competitive due to the limited number of accredited programs and the large number of applicants each year. Compared to other healthcare fields, there are fewer veterinary schools in the United States, which increases the level of competition for available seats.

While programs publish minimum admission requirements, successful applicants typically exceed these benchmarks. Competitive candidates often demonstrate:

- Strong academic performance (GPA typically around 3.5 or higher)

- Extensive animal and veterinary experience (often hundreds to thousands of hours)
- A strong understanding of the veterinary profession
- Leadership roles and extracurricular involvement
- Strong letters of recommendation, particularly from veterinarians
- Clear motivation for pursuing a career in veterinary medicine

Veterinary schools use a **holistic review process**, meaning they evaluate applicants based on more than just grades. Admissions committees consider personal qualities such as communication skills, professionalism, compassion, and commitment to animal care.

It is also important to recognize the strength of the applicant pool. Many applicants have years of experience working with animals, including employment in veterinary clinics or agricultural settings. As a result, meeting minimum requirements does not guarantee admission.

Students should approach the pre-veterinary pathway with long-term planning, consistent involvement in animal-related experiences, and a strong commitment to both academic and professional development.

Additionally, many applicants take one or more gap years to gain additional experience, strengthen their application, and improve their competitiveness before applying.

Is Veterinary Medicine Right for You

A career in veterinary medicine can be highly rewarding, but it also comes with significant challenges. Students considering this path should carefully evaluate whether it aligns with their interests, strengths, and long-term goals.

Veterinarians often work long and sometimes irregular hours, including evenings, weekends, and emergency shifts. The profession can also be physically demanding, requiring standing for extended periods, handling animals, and performing procedures.

In addition to physical demands, veterinary medicine can be emotionally challenging. Veterinarians may need to make difficult decisions regarding animal care, including euthanasia, and must support pet owners during stressful and emotional situations. Strong communication skills are essential, as veterinarians work closely with clients to explain diagnoses, treatment options, and care plans.

It is also important to recognize that working with animals is only one aspect of the profession. Veterinarians must also manage medical records, collaborate with staff, and sometimes handle business responsibilities within a clinic setting.

Gaining hands-on experience with animals and veterinarians early in the undergraduate years can help students better understand the realities of the profession and determine if it is the right fit for them.

Alternative Pathways: Gap Years and Post-Baccalaureate Programs

Some students choose to take a gap year before applying to veterinary school in order to gain additional animal or veterinary experience or strengthen their academic record. In some cases, students may also complete additional coursework or post-baccalaureate programs to improve their GPA. These pathways are common and can help make applicants more competitive.

Potential Barriers to Admission

In addition to academic and experiential requirements, there are several factors that may impact a student's ability to gain admission to veterinary school and successfully complete the program.

Academic Performance

Veterinary schools place a strong emphasis on academic performance, particularly in science coursework. A low GPA can significantly limit admission opportunities. While improvement over time can strengthen an application, consistent academic success is important to demonstrate readiness for the rigor of veterinary school.

Limited Animal and Veterinary Experience

One of the most significant barriers to admission is a lack of hands-on experience working with animals. Veterinary schools expect applicants to have extensive animal and veterinary experience, often totaling hundreds to thousands of hours. Students who do not plan ahead may struggle to gain sufficient experience before applying.

Financial Cost

Veterinary school can be expensive, often resulting in significant student loan debt. Students must consider tuition, living expenses, and application-related costs. The financial investment can be a barrier, especially when compared to the average starting salary in the profession.

Time Commitment

The path to becoming a veterinarian requires a long-term commitment, including undergraduate education (4 years) and veterinary school (4 years). Additional training such as internships or residencies may extend this timeline.

Emotional and Physical Demands

Veterinary medicine can be both physically and emotionally demanding. Veterinarians may work long hours, handle stressful situations, and make difficult decisions, including euthanasia. Students should be prepared for these challenges and develop coping strategies to maintain well-being.

Access to Opportunities

Some students may have limited access to veterinary clinics, farms, or animal-related opportunities, which can make it more difficult to gain the required experience. Building connections and seeking out opportunities early can help overcome this barrier.

Veterinary Schools Nearby and Their Requirements

Below are examples of veterinary schools in the region along with general admission statistics and key characteristics of each program. Students should note that requirements vary by program and may change each year.

Veterinary School	Location	Degree	Avg GPA	GRE	Program Length	Special Focus	Notable Requirements
University of Pennsylvania	Philadelphia, PA	DVM	~3.6	Optional	4 years	Research, small animal	Highly competitive, strong research focus
Virginia-Maryland College	Blacksburg, VA	DVM	~3.5	Optional	4 years	Large animal, rural medicine	Regional preference for VA/MD residents
Cornell University	Ithaca, NY	DVM	~3.7	Optional	4 years	Research, specialty medicine	Highly competitive, strong academics required
North Carolina State University	Raleigh, NC	DVM	~3.6	Optional	4 years	Clinical training, diverse species	Strong emphasis on hands-on experience
Tufts University Cummings	North Grafton, MA	DVM	~3.6	Optional	4 years	Clinical and research	Focus on animal and public health
University of Georgia	Athens, GA	DVM	~3.5	Optional	4 years	Large animal, research	Broad clinical exposure
Ohio State University	Columbus, OH	DVM	~3.6	Optional	4 years	Comprehensive clinical training	Large program with many specialties
University of Florida	Gainesville, FL	DVM	~3.6	Optional	4 years	Research and clinical	Strong focus on innovation

While GPA and GRE scores are important, veterinary schools evaluate applicants holistically, considering animal experience, veterinary experience, leadership, and personal qualities. Students are encouraged to research each program individually to ensure they meet all specific requirements.

Student Resources

Below is a list of resources for students to explore when learning more about veterinary medicine, the application process, and career pathways:

- American Veterinary Medical Association
<https://www.avma.org/>
 Provides information on veterinary careers, education, and professional standards.
- Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges
<https://www.aavmc.org/>
 Offers resources on applying to veterinary school, prerequisites, and program information.
- VMCAS
<https://www.aavmc.org/becoming-a-veterinarian/how-to-apply/>
 Centralized application service for veterinary schools.
- Salisbury University Health Professions Advising Program
<https://www.salisbury.edu/academic-offices/advising-center/hpap/>
 Provides advising, application support, and resources for Salisbury University students pursuing veterinary careers.