HEALTH BASICS

Doctor of osteopathic medicine

A doctor of osteopathic medicine is a fully qualified US physician with additional training in hands-on techniques.

WHAT IT IS
A US physician holding a Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine degree

WHERE IT COMES UP
Choosing a physician, reading credentials, or considering hands-on treatment

WHY IT MATTERS
Clarifies medical training, professional scope, and treatment options

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease, diagnosis, or lesser medical degree

WHO TO ASK
State medical board or the physician's practice

HOW IT IS CHECKED
State license and board certification records

Overview

A doctor of osteopathic medicine, usually written as DO , is a physician trained and licensed in the United States. A DO can diagnose medical conditions, prescribe medicines, perform surgery, and work in any medical specialty when appropriately trained and licensed.

This is not a disease or diagnosis. It is a professional degree and title.

DOs complete medical school and supervised residency training. Their education covers the same broad areas of medicine as the education of doctors of medicine, or MDs. These include anatomy, medications, surgery, mental health, preventive care, and the diagnosis and treatment of illness.

Osteopathic medical schools also teach osteopathic manipulative medicine . This includes ways of examining the muscles, joints, and related tissues using the hands. Some DOs use these techniques regularly, while others rarely or never use them in practice.

The term can mean something different outside the United States. In some countries, an "osteopath" is a professional who provides manual therapy but is not a physician. When receiving care outside the US, check the person's exact qualifications and legal scope of practice.

How it works

A person pursuing a DO degree first completes college-level requirements and then attends an accredited osteopathic medical school. Medical school usually includes classroom and laboratory learning followed by supervised clinical training with patients.

DO students take the Comprehensive Osteopathic Medical Licensing Examination, known as COMLEX-USA . Some also take the United States Medical Licensing Examination, or USMLE.

After medical school, graduates enter residency training in a specialty such as family medicine, internal medicine, pediatrics, psychiatry, emergency medicine, or surgery. MD and DO graduates train in the same US graduate medical education accreditation system.

A medical degree alone does not give someone an unrestricted right to practise. A physician must meet the licensing requirements of the state or territory where they work. Licensure and board certification are different:

Osteopathic training emphasizes how body structures, movement, and overall health can affect one another. This does not mean every DO follows the same style of care or provides manual treatment.

When used, osteopathic manipulative treatment , or OMT, may involve gentle pressure, stretching, resistance, positioning, or quicker controlled movements. The technique chosen should reflect the reason for treatment, the person's health, and their preferences. OMT should only take place with informed consent.

- Licensure is the legal permission to practise medicine in a jurisdiction.
- Board certification is an additional specialty credential earned through an approved certifying board.
- Hospital privileges authorize a physician to perform particular procedures at a hospital.

Why it matters for your health

Seeing "DO" after a physician's name tells you about their medical degree. It does not, by itself, tell you their specialty, experience, communication style, or whether they use OMT.

In the United States, a licensed DO can provide the same broad range of medical care as an appropriately licensed MD. For example, both may serve as primary care physicians, surgeons, hospital specialists, or psychiatrists.

A DO's osteopathic training may affect how they assess muscle and joint concerns. However, it does not guarantee that every visit will include hands-on treatment. It also does not mean that

standard tests, medicines, surgery, or referrals will be avoided.

Evidence for manual treatment is specific to the technique and the condition being treated. OMT should not be viewed as a general replacement for medical evaluation or established treatment. If OMT is suggested, you can ask what goal it has, what evidence supports it for your situation, and what other options are available.

The letters after a physician's name should not be the only basis for choosing care. Specialty training, an active medical license, relevant experience, accessibility, and your ability to communicate comfortably with the physician also matter.

What can go wrong

The most common problem is confusion about credentials. A US-trained DO physician is not the same as a nonphysician osteopath or someone offering "osteopathic" services without a medical license. Similar titles can represent different training in different countries.

It is also possible to assume that every DO provides OMT. Many do not. If hands-on care is important to you, ask whether the physician offers it and for which conditions.

Manual treatment may not be suitable for every person or every part of the body. Conditions such as a recent fracture, severe osteoporosis, bone infection, cancer affecting bone, spinal cord compression, or an unstable joint may require avoidance or modification of certain techniques. A clinician considering OMT should review relevant medical conditions, recent injuries, operations, medicines, and imaging.

Temporary soreness or stiffness can occur after manual treatment. Contact the practice for routine follow-up if discomfort persists, worsens gradually, or interferes with normal activity. You can also follow up if the treatment has not helped as expected or you are unsure what activity is safe afterward.

Serious complications following manipulation are uncommon, but new neurological symptoms need urgent assessment. Seek emergency care for:

These symptoms can relate to conditions such as stroke, injury to an artery in the neck, or pressure on the spinal nerves. They should not be managed through a routine appointment.

- Sudden weakness or numbness, especially on one side
- Trouble speaking, facial drooping, loss of coordination, or fainting
- A sudden severe headache or severe neck pain after neck manipulation
- New loss of bladder or bowel control, or numbness around the groin

- Severe breathing difficulty, chest pain, or loss of consciousness

What you can do

You do not need a medical test to confirm that someone is a DO. Their education and authority to practise are checked through professional records.

Before choosing a physician, you can:

If OMT is offered, ask what technique is planned, what it is intended to address, and what alternatives exist. Mention recent injuries, fractures, surgery, osteoporosis, cancer, infections, pregnancy, bleeding disorders, or medicines that affect blood clotting. These details may influence whether a technique is appropriate.

You may decline OMT or ask for the treatment to stop at any point. Declining hands-on treatment does not prevent you from receiving other medical care.

For ordinary questions about credentials, treatment goals, or expected soreness, contact the physician's practice during normal hours. Use urgent or emergency services for the warning signs listed above rather than waiting for a routine reply.

- Look up their active license through the relevant state medical board
- Confirm their specialty and any board certification they claim
- Ask whether they completed residency training relevant to your needs
- Check whether "osteopath" means a physician in your country
- Keep the physician's name, specialty, and contact details in your health records

Common questions

Is a DO a real medical doctor?

Yes. In the United States, a licensed DO is a physician. DOs complete medical school, residency training, licensing examinations, and state licensing requirements.

What is the difference between a DO and an MD?

They earn different medical degrees and usually take different licensing examination pathways. DO education also includes osteopathic principles and hands-on examination and treatment methods. Both may enter the same specialties and accredited residency programs.

Can a DO prescribe medicine or perform surgery?

A licensed DO can prescribe medicines and perform procedures within their training, specialty, license, and workplace privileges. The same professional limits apply to other physicians.

Will a DO always use manipulation?

No. Some DOs use OMT often, some use it only in selected situations, and others do not use it in their current practice. Ask before booking if you specifically want this type of care.

Is osteopathic manipulation the same as chiropractic care?

No. Some techniques may appear similar, but the professions have different education, licensing, and practice frameworks. A DO is a physician. A chiropractor is not a medical physician, although chiropractors are licensed health professionals in the United States.

Does "holistic" mean a DO avoids standard treatment?

No. "Holistic" generally means considering the person's overall health and circumstances. It does not mean avoiding medicines, tests, referrals, or surgery when those forms of care are appropriate.

How can I check a DO's credentials?

Search the official medical board website for the state or territory where the physician works. You can separately check specialty board certification. A clinic should also be able to explain the physician's specialty and whether they provide OMT.

Sources

- American Osteopathic Association. "What Is a DO?"
- American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine. "About Osteopathic Medicine."
- National Board of Osteopathic Medical Examiners. "COMLEX-USA."
- Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education. "Single GME Accreditation System."
- Federation of State Medical Boards. "Understanding Medical Regulation in the United States."
- National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health. "Osteopathic Medicine: What You Need to Know."
- American Board of Medical Specialties. "What Is Board Certification?"