

# Research your doctor or surgeon



You've decided to go ahead with a surgery or procedure and now are in the process of choosing which physician to work with.

...or you're considering a surgery or procedure and you are curious about which specialist to talk with.

...or somebody you know is about to undergo a procedure and you'd like to double or triple check the surgeon.

You came to the right place.

Most people spend more time considering a house or a car purchase than they do when selecting a doctor.

When was the last vacation you went on? Did you research the flights? The rental cars? The hotels or resorts? The best places to eat? The currency exchange? Maybe learned a little bit of the local language so you could ask for a beer or where the bathroom was? Oddly enough (or maybe sadly enough) that's more research than most people do before undergoing surgery.

What you have here is a detailed article that will give you everything you need to research a doctor or surgeon before your or a loved one's surgery.

We've left no stone unturned, we've left no question unanswered. It's all right here.

Take the time you need and if you find an error or if you do find information we should include, we'd love to hear about it so we can update this document and further benefit the next person who reads it.

The below Table of Contents shows what this article discusses along with links to each section.

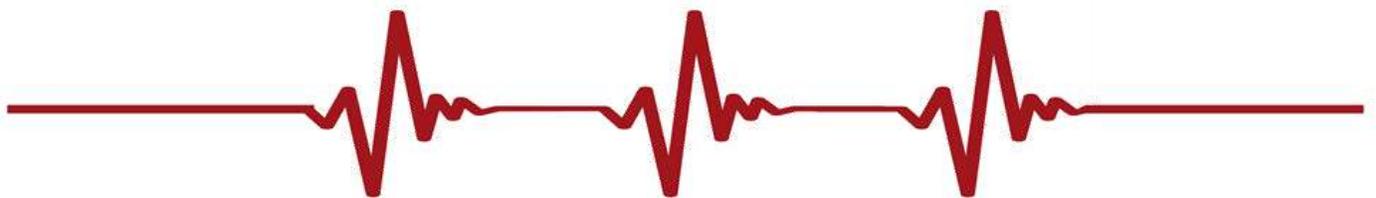


Feel free to jump around as this document was written linearly but we understand that not everybody will best read it that way. As you browse, any time you see the blue arrow icon (to the left) throughout this document, clicking on it will always bring you back to the Table of Contents.

Happy Researching!

## Table of Contents

1. [Why should you research your surgeon?](#)
2. [What should you be looking for?](#)
3. [Licensing, Board Certification and Accreditation](#)
4. [Extra Info about Board Certification \(because it's important!\)](#)
5. [Internship vs. Residency vs. Fellowship](#)
6. [Researching your Surgeon](#)
  1. [Nationwide Surgeon research](#)
  2. [State by state surgeon research](#)
  3. [Search by name](#)
  4. [Search by specialty](#)
7. [Board Specialties](#) (description and links for the major 24 board specialties)



## Why Research your Surgeon?

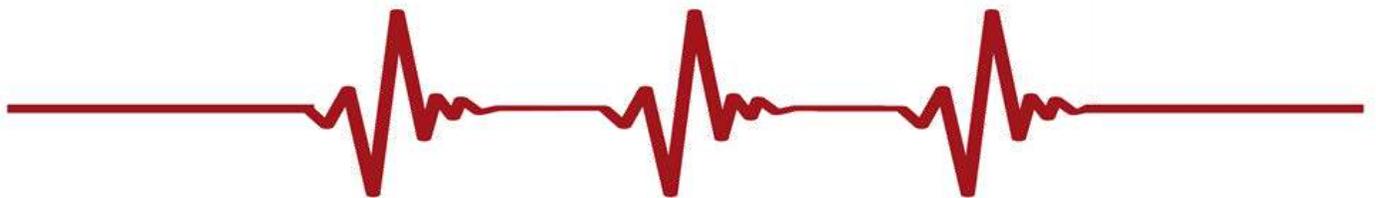
You don't have to look far to find horror stories of "plastic surgery gone wrong", "surgical items left inside body after operation", or "wrong arm amputated".

It's also not a stretch to say that we all want to avoid these and other disastrous medical complications or outcomes by negligent or less than competent surgeons.

The best way to assure that is to do your research. As mentioned before, if you were buying a house, you'd research the neighborhood, schools, demographics, average income and competitive prices for the house you're considering, right? That might take days! What we're doing below here can be done in an afternoon and it's far more important than a house purchase!

Your health...your life...is at stake.

Take the time to do it.



## What should you be looking for?

When digging into a surgeon's education and experience, there is a lot to take in and a lot of different places to get it from. There are also a million and one places and ways to get sidetracked so every now and then, while you're doing your research, stop and ask yourself if you are still on target. There's a very good chance you'll drift a bit, so hold yourself accountable to stay on track.

What are you looking for? We highly recommend creating a document or a spreadsheet to record this information for a later comparison between the surgeons you are researching.

## Where did your surgeon get his/her degree?

On the surface, this is obvious. Was it a no-name or little known school or was it ivy league? This may point to a better foundation of knowledge.

## Where did your surgeon get his/her medical degree?

Again, somewhat obvious. Did your surgeon graduate from Harvard Medical School or Joe's Medical College? There is a yearly publication of the top schools and top medical schools in the country and this should be consulted to determine how high your surgeon's school ranked.

## Where did your surgeon perform his/her residency?

Residency placement is a strong indicator of the type of training and experience your surgeon received. Most surgeon bios will state where they performed their residencies and any additional responsibilities they had at the time.

## Did your surgeon perform a fellowship and, if yes, where?

A fellowship after residency shows increased desire to learn and stay abreast of the most recent medical breakthroughs and techniques. Like the residency, most surgeon bios will state if they participated in a fellowship and where. And like the residency, this is another very strong indicator of the quality and competence of the surgeon.

## What state is your surgeon licensed in?

Basic common sense, but make sure your surgeon is licensed in your state. Licenses are statewide only – they must be licensed in the state in which they practice.

## What Board Certification(s) does your surgeon have?

Bear in mind that if your surgeon is not board certified, then he/she is a basic licensed doctor with no tested or evaluated specialty.

Are they double or triple board certified and, if so, for which specialties and why?

This isn't always a good thing. If a surgeon spent time becoming board certified in Pathology and then later in Plastic Surgery, you might want to ask why they changed focus. Then again, a double board certification in Surgery and Thoracic Surgery is generally considered a good combination. The key is, do they relate and, if they don't, why the change?

Then again, any surgeon that has the desire and tenacity to go through two residencies is probably at the top of their game. So there's no hard and fast answer here – like everything else, it's highly subjective and will depend on what the surgeon has to say about it. When you're considering a critical procedure such as

a [Rhinoplasty](#) or a [Mommy Makeover](#) procedure, do you want a surgeon that has spent their entire time focusing only on Plastic Surgery or would you rather have one that has spread his or her expertise around a bit?

## What additional research has your surgeon been involved with?

Many surgeons, in an effort to expand their expertise and improve or enhance medical techniques participate in study or research alongside their primary position. A surgeon that is published in one of the well known medical journals, or that has participated in ground breaking research shows unusual attention and focus in their chosen specialty – these surgeons are generally well regarded and tend to be more knowledgeable of current trends and techniques.

## What vendor or manufacturer relationships might your surgeon have that could affect treatment or medicines?

Many surgeons, for one reason or another, develop relationships with medical vendors or manufacturers. Often this is harmless and gives the surgeon a chance to further expand his or her horizons but at times, it can influence the treatment you may receive.

Pharmaceutical Salespeople – commonly known as Drug Reps – often develop relationships with doctors and give these doctors free samples that the doctors can then give to their patients. It is entirely legal for doctors to give this medicine to their patients but they cannot sell it to them.

Medical device companies are free to do that same as pharmaceutical reps, developing relationships with doctors and providing access to new technology.

The problem that can arise if these relationships are taken to the extreme is that the doctor may prescribe a medicine from a friendly rep in favor over a better medicine, or may opt for less effective medical devices (for example) over better equipment. In a well publicized case, four orthopedic device manufacturers paid \$311 million to settle claims that they had bribed surgeons to use their hip and knee replacement implant products.

## What disciplinary procedures has your surgeon had taken against him/her?

Have there been any lawsuits? Are any pending?

<http://patients.about.com/od/doctorinformationwebsites/a/malpracticeinfo.htm>

## How long has your surgeon been practicing?

This is important as you may have a preference of one over the other. Generally, there are two extremes with the expected middle ground cases as well

The brand new surgeon that is eager and smart and has been recently instructed of all the latest medical procedures and equipment

The aged surgeon who has been around a long time, has tons of experience, but has not been instructed on the latest medical procedures and equipment

And the middle of the road surgeon who has been practicing for an appreciable amount of time, yet is “new” enough to have been trained on the latest medical procedures and equipment.

For the latter two categories, the specific surgeon’s initiative and interest in continued education about their specialty will weigh heavily here – there’s nothing to say that an older surgeon isn’t up to speed on new advancements.

## How long has your surgeon been practicing in his/her present location?

Has your surgeon moved around a bit? If so, why? If they recently moved to your state, you should research what they did in their previous location. Most of the time they are simply relocating with no bad intentions but occasionally, like anybody else, they are running from something.

## How many procedures of the kind you are considering has your surgeon performed in the last year? Last 5 years? How many complications have arisen in those time frames?

This seems like a difficult question to ask your surgeon but you should feel entirely comfortable asking him or her directly. Think about your own job – how often are you called upon to tell a potential customer how well you can do it...how well you’ve done it in the past...how many times in the past it hasn’t gone well. Why should it be any different for a surgeon?

## What hospitals are your surgeon authorized to perform work in?

This is an important aspect that is often overlooked. Where is your surgeon authorized to work?

This may also affect your insurance as your doctor may be covered, but the hospital may not be. Or vice-versa. Yes, hospitals and doctors can be (often are) listed in your insurance plan's network so ensure your doctor is teamed up with a hospital that is accepted by your plan.

## Are there any personality or attitude problems you perceive with your surgeon or his/her staff? How comfortable are you in the surgeon's office?

This is one of those intangibles that only you can answer. How comfy are you with the surgeon, the staff and the office in general?

One common and obvious piece of advice you may notice that is missing from the above checklist is patient reviews. There a host of internet sites you can turn to to read reviews but we advise caution with this approach for a number of reasons:

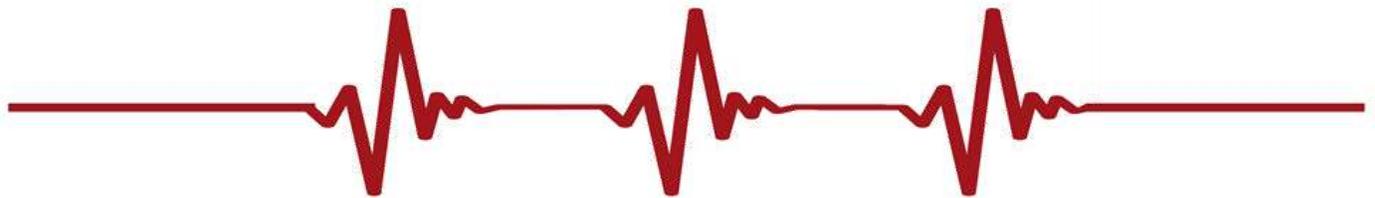
Some review sites actually allow the reviewee to alter or change the review. Obviously a bad practice and you don't see this much. The catch is, it's hard to determine what sites actually allow this and which don't...and which category the site you are looking at falls into

Most review sites have glowing recommendations of surgeons and any derogatory or inflammatory reviews are not posted. This can skew your research in favor of a surgeon that may actually have performed incompetently in the past. There are many instances of doctors who have been sued, even arrested for the damage to patients, despite stellar online reviews.

The only reviews you should look at are the ones where you know good, bad and mediocre reviews are posted and not alterable by anybody. Certainly the surgeon can offer comments but the primary review should be unalterable. With this in mind, here are a few to look at:

- [Yelp](#) (yep, Yelp!)
- [www.Healthgrades.com](http://www.Healthgrades.com) – this is a site you can research based on a number of parameters that are important to you.
- [www.Vitals.com](http://www.Vitals.com) – very much like HeathGrades – you can search based on parameters you are interested in.
- [www.RateMDs.com](http://www.RateMDs.com) – much like the above.

Once you get the answers to these questions, you'll be in a very good position to make a well-informed and educated decision about your surgeon or the surgeons you are considering. It actually takes very little time to gather this information and, as promised, we provide everything you need right here in this article. So get a piece of paper or spin up a spreadsheet and start researching and taking notes.



## Licensing, Board Certification and Accreditation

There is some confusion surrounding these terms and how they apply to doctors and/or surgeons. Take a look at the below to better understand these distinctions and to help you make a more informed decision.

**Licensing:** A doctor or surgeon practicing in any state must be licensed in that state via the state's physician licensing system. These are entirely state driven and are purely a license, not a certification. The requirements for licensing are far less rigorous than for certification boards. Any board certified doctor or surgeon will be licensed, but not every licensed doctor or surgeon will be board certified. Without a state issued license, the doctor is not allowed to practice medicine.

Licensing is entirely public knowledge – including the granting of or withdrawal of a doctor's license.

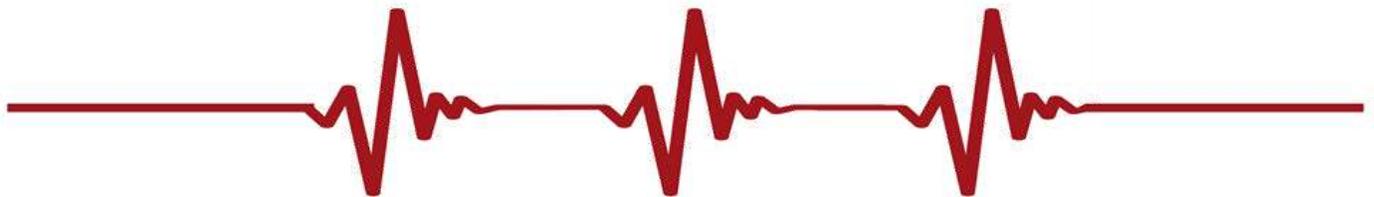
Licensing is non-specialty specific. A licensed doctor is authorized to provide any medical or surgical service.

**Board Certification:** More rigorous than state licensing is Board Certification, which is a voluntary process demonstrating a surgeon's commitment to learning and patient care. Below is a detailed description and links to check any doctor's or surgeon's board certification status. Bear in mind that a surgeon may be board certified in one area but practicing in another – there is nothing to prevent this. Likewise, there is no method in place to check a claim that a surgeon is, in fact, board certified other than the manual research you are doing now. It is in your best interest to understand the board certifications and run through these quick and simple verification checks before undergoing any procedure with a doctor or surgeon.

It should be noted that obtaining Board Certification in any of the specialty areas is tough – the result is the kind of surgeon or doctor you want to have operating on you. At the most basic, Board Certification requires a medical degree, an additional 5 years of training as a resident surgeon, and then the doctor must pass comprehensive oral and written exams.

When researching Board Certification, you'll also see a term used quite a bit: Maintenance of Certification, or MOC. This denotes an ongoing program with requirements for learning and assessments. Meeting the requirements of their speciality's MOC shows a commitment to sustain and improve the quality of care they provide.

**Accreditation:** A doctor or surgeon can obtain accreditation by displaying a number of quality defining practices, to include ethical behavior, participation in a peer review, clinical self-assessment, absence of disciplinary actions, and a host of others. Accreditation is non-specialty specific and requires only that the doctor be licensed, not necessarily board certified.



## More about Board Certification

A little background is in order on the subject of “Board Certifications”. It’s important to understand that any surgeon that is Board Certified will be certified in a given specialty. So a Board Certified Plastic Surgeon will have gone through medical school, got his or her license, performed a residency, survived the evaluations and passed the oral and written tests associated with the Plastic Surgery Board Certification.

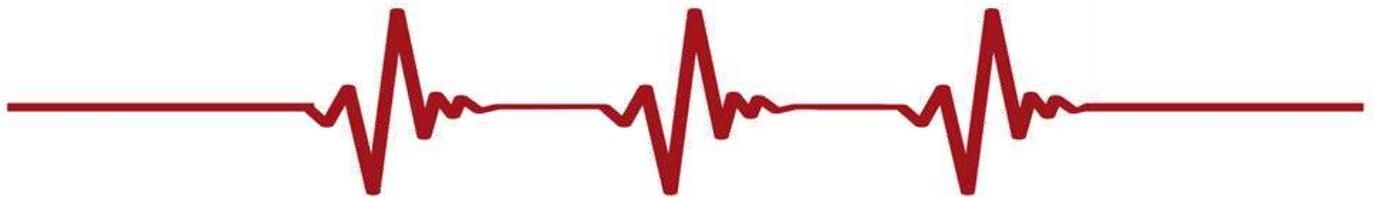
It’s important to check the specialty of your surgeon’s board certification. Remember, the fact that he or she has a state license allows him or her to practice medicine in your state, regardless of what specialty they advertise. It makes sense to match up their board certifications with the procedures you’re considering. It would be far better to go to the previously discussed Board Certified Plastic Surgeon for a [Tummy Tuck](#) or [Breast Augmentation](#) than to a Board Certified Thoracic Surgeon. The thoracic surgeon might be

great, but he has not done a residency, gone through the evaluations and examinations that are specific to Plastic Surgery.

As mentioned elsewhere, there are many cases where surgeons can be double and even triple board certified. What you want to look for here is a logical progression of board certifications – a progression that shows continued interest in a given specialty. A surgeon that is double board certified in Plastic Surgery and Radiology shows a bit of a lack of focus or interest in one or the other areas of expertise. From the dates of the certifications, you can tell which came first and, therefore, where this surgeon’s most recent interests lie. Far better to find a double certified surgeon in related fields such as Plastic Surgery and Otolaryngology for example.

As far as board certifications themselves, there are several “Boards” that offer certifications.

- 3 Primary “Boards”
  - [American Board of Medical Specialties \(ABMS\)](#)
    - 24 specialty boards
    - This is often considered the “gold standard” of medical boards – however, that does not discount the importance or value of the other board certifications below
  - [American Osteopathic Association](#)
    - 18 separate specialty boards
  - [American Board of Physician Specialties](#)
    - 19 separate specialty boards
- Other Boards
  - American Board of Facial and Plastic Reconstructive Surgery (ABFPRS)
  - American Board of Urgent Care Medicine (ABUCM)



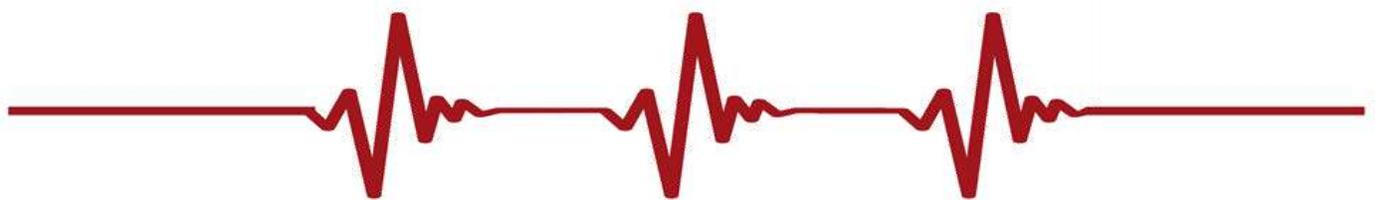
## Intern vs. Fellowship vs. Residency

When doing your research, you will find surgeon descriptions that say they did their residency at a given hospital and then a few will also show a fellowship at the same or different location. It’s important to understand these distinctions as they are important in terms of skill and an indication of a doctor who is interested in ongoing education.

**Intern** is a first year of post medical school training. Interns typically require the most supervision and are considered the least qualified surgeons.

**Residency** is the required length of time in which a licensed doctor must practice in a specialty to be board certified. Most specialties require a doctor to have practiced in a residency for a given amount of time – 5 years for example. During this time, they gain training and increased responsibility but they are, at all times, under the watch of an attending surgeon. For the most part, think of a residency as that period of time that (normally) follows a doctor getting their state license and starting to train for their specialty. There will usually be many resident surgeons on a given staff and the most senior or most experienced among them is the Chief Resident.

**Fellowship** is specialty training that follows residency training. A doctor undergoing fellowship shows increased focus and interest in the latest medical techniques and procedures. Many “residents” undergo a Fellowship while waiting on their Board Certification to be completed. These surgeons can sometimes supervise resident surgeons.



## Researching your surgeon

We’ve covered it before, but I’ll say it again here. The first thing to look for is a license. Remember that your surgeon is licensed in a given state so you want to make sure your surgeon’s license matches the state you live in (or will be having the procedure done in).

After that, you’ll want to do a bit more digging to find out the other details such as where they got their degree, where they performed their residency, if and where they performed their fellowship, if they have any negative information associated with them, have they moved around too much and do they do paid research for vendors or manufacturers. Most of this information can be found on the links below.

Bear in mind that negative or disciplinary comments are not always provided. They are also not provided until the case or lawsuit is finalized so although the links below may show a clean history, there is still a chance your surgeon is involved in an ongoing lawsuit or legal situation. After all of the research is done below, you should follow it up with some basic Google searches such as:

Google the following terms:

- surgeon\_name
- surgeon\_name awards
- surgeon\_name research
- surgeon\_name malpractice
- surgeon\_name lawsuit
- surgeon\_name disciplinary

You should also look your doctor up on LinkedIn to see what kind of professional profile he or she maintains. And, of course, Twitter and Facebook can also be researched to get a more well-rounded picture of what your surgeon is really like.

It's important to note that although you want and need to know these details, sometimes doctors get sued frivolously or by just plain old cranky patients. So if your research shows your doctor was sued, take the time to find out why. You may dismiss an otherwise excellent surgeon because one of his patients didn't like his bedside manner or maybe the patient was just having a bad day. It happens.

## Research Surgeons Nationwide (Less detail provided):

<http://certificationmatters.org/> (free account required)

<http://www.fsmb.org/> (Federation of State Medical Boards)

## Research Surgeons by State (Most detail)

[Alabama](#) | [Alaska](#) | [Arizona](#) | [Arkansas](#) | [California](#) | [Colorado](#) | [Connecticut](#) | [Delaware](#) | [Florida](#) | [District of Columbia](#)

[Georgia](#) | [Hawaii](#) | [Idaho](#) | [Illinois](#) | [Indiana](#) | [Iowa](#) | [Kansas](#) | [Kentucky](#) | [Louisiana](#) | [Maine](#)

[Maryland](#) | [Massachusetts](#) | [Michigan](#) | [Minnesota](#) | [Mississippi](#) | [Missouri](#) | [Montana](#) | [Nebraska](#) | [Nevada](#)

[New Hampshire](#) | [New Jersey](#) | [New Mexico](#) | [New York](#) | [North Carolina](#) | [North Dakota](#) | [Ohio](#) | [Oklahoma](#)

[Oregon](#) | [Pennsylvania](#) | [Rhode Island](#) | [South Carolina](#) | [South Dakota](#) | [Tennessee](#) | [Texas](#) | [Utah](#) | [Vermont](#)

[Virginia](#) | [Washington](#) | [West Virginia](#) | [Wisconsin](#) | [Wyoming](#)

## Research Surgeons by name

There are a lot of different tools to use to research physicians. The best source of these is noted above, the Federation of State Medical Boards, or FSMB. However aside from this you can also use the following. Just be sure to understand that the results you are seeing are not necessarily official documents or findings but rather, they are often patient opinions (which can often be just as valuable!). These are provided above as well but we thought it useful to give them to you again here to minimize your scrolling.

- [Yelp](#) (yep, Yelp!)
- [www.Healthgrades.com](http://www.Healthgrades.com) – this is a site you can research based on a number of parameters that are important to you.
- [www.Vitals.com](http://www.Vitals.com) – very much like HeathGrades – you can search based on parameters you are interested in.
- [www.RateMDs.com](http://www.RateMDs.com) – much like the above.

## Search surgeons by specialty

There are times when you don't have a surgeon's name – you just need to find a list of surgeons or doctors that have a specific kind of practice. An organization that is dedicated to rating the quality of physicians based on the quality of the care they provide to their patients is the [National Committee for Quality Assurance](#) (NCQA). Feel free to use that link to read and fully understand what the NCQA does, but they have another, very useful link on their site that will show you physicians that have been awarded for specific specialty related areas in your state. Go to this link and enter your state and the “recognition program” you are interested in. The below example shows a search a physician in Georgia that has received recognition as an outstanding Diabetes physician with a result of 154 Georgia based physicians, their contact information and what awards they have received:

### Clinician Directory and Search

This Recognized Clinician Directory helps individuals find doctors who have demonstrated that they meet important standards of care. Results of your interest.

Search
Advanced Search

Complete any of the following criteria.

State:

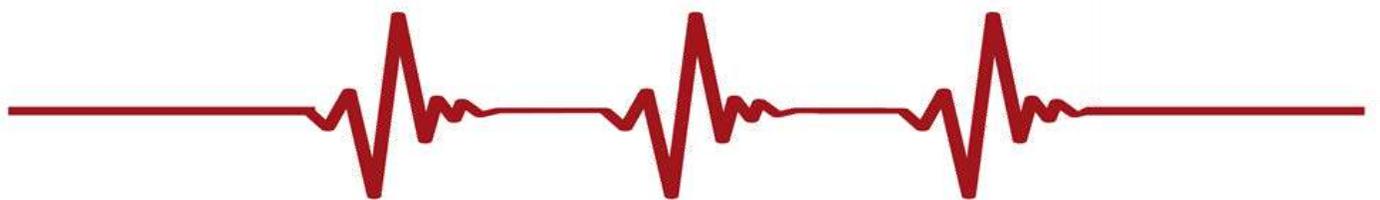
Recognition Program:

#### Clinician Search Results

[New Search](#)

Search results: (1 - 96) of 104

Clinician Title	Address	Current Recognitions	Recognition Programs
<a href="#">Appelwood MD, Monica</a>	Emory Patient-Centered Primary Care 1525 Clifton Road Atlanta, GA 30322	PCMH 2011 Level 3 (10/23/2012 - 10/23/2015) DRP (10/23/2013 - 10/23/2018)	
<a href="#">Armitage MD, Katherine Marie</a>	Harbin Clinic Internal Medicine 1825 Martha Berry Blvd Reno, GA 30185	PCMH 2011 Level 3 (05/04/2013 - 05/04/2016) DRP (04/23/2015 - 04/23/2018)	



## Board Specialities

There are 24 boards of specialization( <http://www.abms.org/member-boards/contact-an-abms-member-board/>) – each pertains to a specific type of practice. For example, Cosmetic or Plastic Surgeons are board certified by The American Board of Plastic Surgery. Below you will find each board and a link or other contact information to validate the certification of a surgeon in that field of practice. Each board is abbreviated as “AB” + “specialty acronym” so the board for Plastic Surgery is abbreviated as ABPLSURG while the board for Internal Medicine is abbreviated as ABIM.

- Allergy and Immunology: [ABAI 1-866-ASK-ABMS](#)
- Colon and Rectal Surgery: [ABCERS – Verify a Physician](#)
- Emergency Medicine: [CertificationMatters.org](#) OR [ABEM – Who is ABEM Certified](#)
- Internal Medicine: [ABIM](#) (front page form)
- Neurological Surgery: [ABNS – Verify Neurosurgeon](#)
- OB/Gyn: [ABOG](#) (front page form)
- Orthopaedic Surgery: [ABOS – Find a Certified Orthopaedic Surgeon](#)
- Pathology: [ABPATH – Verification](#) (no online verification – must mail in form). There is an email contact for “verification” on the “contact us” page
- Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation: [ABPMR – Physician Search](#)
- Preventive Medicine: [ABPM – Verify](#)
- Radiology: [ABR](#) (front page form)
- Thoracic Surgery: [ABTS – Verification](#) (312-202-5900)
- Anesthesiology: [ABA](#) (front page form)
- Dermatology: [CertificationMatters.org](#) OR current year’s certifications: [ABDERM – Certifications](#)
- Family Medicine: [ABFM – Verify](#)
- Medical Genetics and Genomics: [ABMGG – Search Members](#)
- Nuclear Medicine: [CertificationMatters.org](#) OR [ABNM – Verification of Diplomate Status](#) (written request)
- Ophthalmology: [ABOP – Verify a Physician](#)
- Otolaryngology: [ABOTO – Verify Physician Certification](#)
- Pediatrics: [ABABP – Verification of Certification](#)
- Plastic Surgery: [ABPLSURG – Surgeon Search](#)
- Psychiatry and Neurology: [ABABPN – Verification Certification](#)
- Surgery: [ABSURGERY – Verify](#)
- Urology: [ABU – Find a Urologist](#)



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