

Plastic surgery

Plastic surgeons restore form and function following illness or trauma.

They also perform aesthetic or 'cosmetic' surgery which changes appearance or form.

Male trainee with surgical mask

Life as a plastic surgeon

You'll treat the whole body and an interesting mix of emergency and non-life-threatening operations in children and adults.

You'll mainly work on reconstructive surgery in the NHS on cases such as breast reconstruction after cancer or burns, surgery for congenital conditions and trauma surgery after accidents and violent incidents. If you do cosmetic or aesthetic surgery it could include facelifts, surgery to treat protruding ears or eyelid surgery.

Your surgery will be varied, covering everything from brief operations under local anaesthetic to lengthy, complex surgery involving collaboration with other surgical specialists and long-term follow-up with patients. Your working week will also include outpatient clinics, ward rounds, pre-operative meetings with patients and monitoring of cases after surgery.

You can expect to work on a mixture of planned cases such as cancer surgery through to emergency cases for trauma, complex wounds or burns, which can sometimes mean callouts at night.

It's an exciting time to be involved in plastic surgery with new developments in areas such as tissue engineering, the development of scar-free wound healing and facial and hand transplants. Research is at the forefront of this specialty and most plastic surgery units in the UK contribute to this.

How much can I earn?

You'll first earn a salary when you start your [foundation training](#) ^[1] after medical school. Find out details of current salary ranges for foundation and specialty training, [SAS doctors](#) ^[2] and consultants on the ['Pay for doctors'](#) ^[3] page.

How about the benefits?

- make a difference
- flexible and part-time working
- high income early in your career
- work anywhere in the world
- excellent pension scheme
- good holiday entitlement
- NHS discounts in shops and restaurants

Must-have skills

- excellent communication skills to manage a wide range of relationships with colleagues, and patients and their families
- emotional resilience, a calm temperament and the ability to work well under pressure
- teamwork and the capacity to lead multidisciplinary teams
- problem-solving and diagnostic skills
- outstanding organisational ability and effective decision-making skills
- first-class time and resource management for the benefit of patients
- a high degree of manual dexterity
- superb hand-eye co-ordination, excellent vision, and visuospatial awareness
- physical stamina to cope with the demands of surgery

Entry requirements

Your first step is medical school. Typically, you'll need excellent GCSEs and three A or A* passes at A level including chemistry for a five-year undergraduate degree in medicine. Many medical schools also ask for biology and others may require maths or physics.

If you already have a degree, you could study for a four-year postgraduate degree in medicine.

You'll need to pass an interview and admissions test. You'll be asked to show how you demonstrate the NHS values such as compassion and respect.

Some medical schools look to recruit a mix of students from different backgrounds and geographical areas, so your educational and economic background and family circumstances could be considered as part of your application.

"I really love the breadth of work in plastic surgery and the fact that you see people of all ages from babies to elderly people. Plastic surgeons treat the whole body and also have an interesting mix of emergency and non life-threatening operations."

[Read Lilli's story](#) ^[4].

What are my chances of starting a career in plastic surgery?

In 2021 there were 543 plastic surgeons in England. There were 190 applications for 41 specialty training places (a competition ratio ^[5] of 4.63).

How to become a plastic surgeon

After medical school, you'll join the paid two-year foundation programme ^[6] where you'll work in six placements in different settings.

After your foundation programme, you can apply for paid specialty training ^[7] to become a plastic surgeon, which will take a minimum of six years.

You may be able to train part time, for example for health reasons or if you have family or caring responsibilities.

Where a career as a plastic surgeon can take you

You could:

- specialise or conduct research in areas such as paediatric plastic surgery, hand surgery, treating congenital conditions such as cleft lip and palate or cancer surgery and reconstruction
- teach medical students or postgraduate students in training
- get involved in research at universities, the NHS or private sector

• Live vacancies

Find a vacancy

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• Further information

These organisations have further information about being a plastic surgeon, particularly as your career progresses. Take a look.

British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons ^[8]

British Association of Plastic and Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgeons [9]

British Society for Surgery of the Hand [10]

Hand Transplant UK [11]

Healing Foundation [12]

Joint Committee on Intercollegiate Examinations [13]

Royal College of Surgeons [14]

Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh [15]

Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow [16]

And hear from someone already working as a plastic surgeon.

David Ward - Consultant Plastic Surgeon, Leicester Royal Infirmary [17]

Other roles that may interest you

- General surgery [18]
- Oral and maxillofacial surgery [19]
- Otorhinolaryngology (ear, nose and throat (ENT) surgery) [20]
- Vascular surgery [21]

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Links

[1] https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/glossary#Foundation_training [2]
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