Gaining experience

This page describes the various ways you can gain the experience you need to prepare you for a career in health. It explains the benefits of gaining experience, how you can make the most of it and how to go about finding opportunities.

For some courses and jobs in health you have to have some appropriate experience. At the very least, you need to demonstrate that you have found out about the role you are interested in and have some understanding of what the work involves.

Ways of getting experience

Getting some relevant experience is one of the most important things you can do to help find a career in health, so take any opportunity you can. Here is a list of the different ways you can gain experience.
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- **work experience placements.** The placement could be just for a day or two, for a week or fortnight, or perhaps for a few hours each week
- **paid part- or full-time work.** Any paid experience in the right sort of environment can be valuable, particularly if you receive training
- **a supported internship.** Supported internships (such as with Project Choice) provide a mix of work placements and study days at college, usually for people aged between 16 and 24
- **volunteering.** Volunteers work alongside staff doing worthwhile tasks. Although you’re not paid, any expenses may be reimbursed. You don’t have to volunteer full time. It could be a one-off project or a weekly commitment that you could fit around your work or studies. It could form part of your gap year either in the UK or overseas
- **other ways** in which you can gain relevant experience include caring for a friend or relative who is sick or disabled

The greater and more varied the experience you have the better, so you could, for instance, do a placement as well as some volunteering.

**Relevant experience**

Ideally you should try to gain experience in the area of health that interests you. However, any experience in healthcare can be useful because just being in a health environment can give you an insight into the work. If you're considering a university course, make sure you find out what sort of experience they're looking for. Contact them or visit their website. Don't assume!

Thousands of organisations provide healthcare in one way or another. You could consider gaining experience at:

- an NHS or private hospital, clinic or health centre
- a charity or social enterprise (such as one that supports people with long-term health conditions, disabilities or older people, or that provide first aid, eg St John Ambulance or the Red Cross)
- a residential care home or day care centre

Your role could be to support patients or clients directly, or staff in general, or it may be behind the scenes.

**Teacher or health services provider?**

- If you are a teacher or work experience coordinator, find out more about our work experience toolkit
If you work in a health services organisation and want to know more about offering work experience opportunities, take a look at our work experience guide for employers.

How experience will benefit you

No matter how you gain experience, there are many benefits. It will, for example:

- provide you with the experience needed for entry to training in certain health careers (if you have a particular career in mind, see our Explore roles section to find out exactly what kind of experience will be useful or necessary)
- allow you to find out more about a career that interests you and decide whether or not it’s right for you
- give you the opportunity to develop some transferable skills (ie skills that are useful in any job, such as communication and teamwork)
- develop your self-confidence, empathy and respect for others
- give you something to put on your applications and to talk about in interviews to show your commitment, motivation and potential
- give you the satisfaction of making a difference to patients or clients and staff

Making the most of your experience

When undertaking your experience opportunity:

- if you’re unsure about anything, ask
- make sure you turn up on time
- look clean and tidy
- follow health and safety procedures
- offer to help people out
- ask people questions about their roles (only when they have time, of course)
- make some notes so that you will be able to recall what you have done and learned

Be aware that staff will be busy, so show some understanding.

When you come to submit applications and go for interviews for courses and jobs, make the most of any experience you’ve gained. Explain:

- what role you have performed and the kind of tasks undertaken
- what you have learned from the experience
- any relevant skills you have developed
- how the experience has reinforced your commitment to your chosen career

Finding an opportunity

If you’re looking for a work experience placement:

- if you’re a student, find out whether your school or college has a list of suitable employers that have taken on work experience students in the past
- ask your teachers or specialist staff at your school or college if they know of any suitable opportunities
- contact suitable employers yourself (you could telephone, email or write)
- ask any contacts you have who work for suitable employers to find out whether you could do a placement at their workplace
○ if you live in the north east, find out who to contact at the NHS trusts offering work experience opportunities [8]

If you want to volunteer, you could find an opportunity through:

○ an organisation you belong to, such as your school or college, Guides or Scouts
○ a scheme, such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award
○ a specific charity or voluntary organisation
○ the National Citizen Service [7] (if you are aged 16 or 17)

You can ask about suitable volunteering opportunities at:

○ local organisations that provide NHS healthcare [8] services
○ your local volunteer centre [9]

You can also search online for suitable volunteering opportunities through:

○ Do-it [10]  
○ TimeBank [11]  
○ Volunteering England [12]  
○ Volunteering Matters [13]  
○ NHS Jobs [14]

For advice on finding paid work experience, see Looking for a job [15]

• But I can’t find suitable experience Expand / Collapse
   If you can’t find the kind of experience you would like or there are limits on what you are able to do for the career you are interested in (because of health and safety, patient privacy etc), other options include:

   ○ shadowing someone in a health career. This would give you the chance to see what they do on a day-to-day basis and ask questions
   ○ talking to someone in a health career. Prepare questions in advance to find out what they do, how they got started and what qualifications they needed and so on
   ○ seek alternatives. See whether experience has to be gained in a health setting. For example, would experience of customer care in another sector be acceptable for the course or career you’re considering?

Source URL: https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/career-planning/improving-your-chances/gaining-experience

Links
[1] https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/i-am/secondary-school-or-fe-college/finishing-levels-or-level-3-qualifications/taking-year-out  
[2] https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/i-am/considering-or-university  