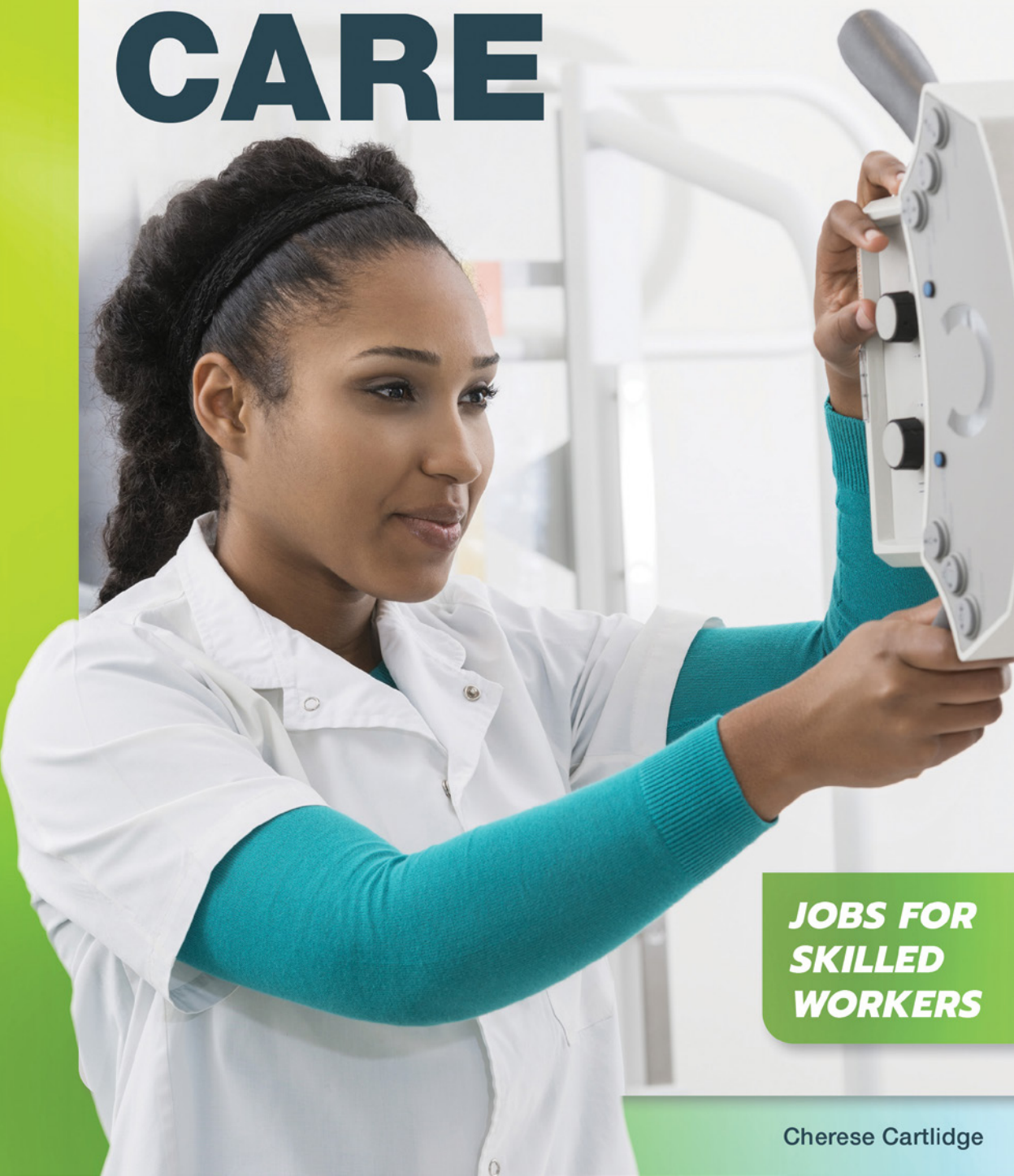


Skilled Jobs in

HEALTH CARE



***JOBS FOR
SKILLED
WORKERS***

Cherese Cartlidge



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Contents

Caring Careers	4
Dental Hygienist	7
Diagnostic Medical Sonographer	15
Emergency Medical Technician	23
Licensed Practical Nurse	30
Massage Therapist	37
Pharmacy Technician	44
Phlebotomist	52
Physical Therapist Assistant	60
Source Notes	68
Interview with a Dental Hygienist	71
Other Jobs in Health Care	74
Index	75
Picture Credits	79
About the Author	80

Diagnostic Medical Sonographer

A Few Facts

Number of Jobs

About 71,130 in 2018

Pay

About \$29,340 to \$93,100

Educational Requirements

Associate's degree

Certification and Licensing

Certification required by most employers

Personal Qualities

Stamina, good interpersonal skills, critical-thinking skills

Work Settings

Hospitals, doctors' offices, medical and diagnostic laboratories

Future Job Outlook

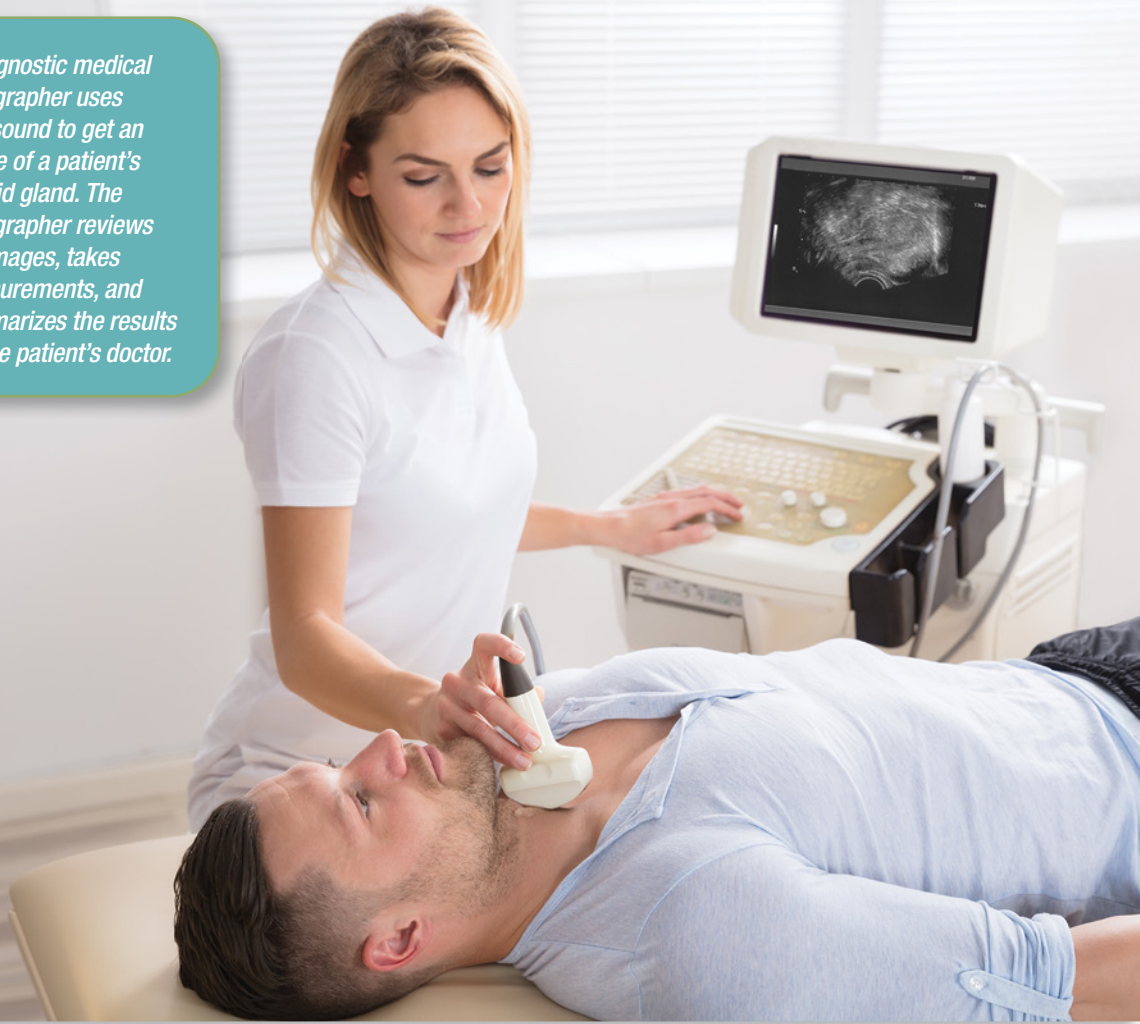
Growth of 17 percent through 2026

What Does a Diagnostic Medical Sonographer Do?

Diagnostic medical sonographers operate imaging equipment such as ultrasound, sonogram, or echocardiogram devices that use high-frequency sound waves to create images of a patient's internal organs or conduct tests on the person. Sonographers are not licensed to assess the images or use them to diagnose patients, but the images they take are used by physicians to diagnose medical conditions. Diagnostic medical sonographers are also called ultrasound technicians, which is just a different title for the same job.

There are many types of diagnostic medical sonographers, including abdominal sonographers, who specialize in imaging the abdominal cavity and nearby organs; cardiac sonographers, who specialize in imaging the heart; and pediatric sonographers, who work with children and infants. The type that is probably most familiar to people is obstetric and gynecologic sonographers, who specialize in imaging pregnant women to track the fetus's growth and health and to detect congenital birth defects.

A diagnostic medical sonographer uses ultrasound to get an image of a patient's thyroid gland. The sonographer reviews the images, takes measurements, and summarizes the results for the patient's doctor.



Whatever their specialty, sonographers often work closely with doctors and surgeons before, during, and after medical procedures to help monitor patients. Sonographers report any abnormalities they spot in a patient's scan to the doctors. Shanna, a sonographer at Woodlands Medical Specialists in Florida, says she enjoys being part of a team that helps figure out what is causing a patient's symptoms. But, she says,

that can also be the worst part of my job. . . . I often get very young patients, and I'm the first to know for sure—not suspect, but to know for sure—that there is really something wrong. For example, you have a seventeen-year-old male

patient come in with right side scrotal pain, and you do the ultrasound and find out he has testicular cancer, and he's seventeen years old. And that can be very difficult.⁹

A Typical Workday

Sonographers usually begin their workday with a morning check-in to discuss the day's procedures with facility staff and review medical charts. Before seeing their first patient, sonographers check the equipment to ensure it is functioning properly. They must document the condition of the equipment, including any failure they find. They then prepare the exam room, gathering ultrasound gel and all other necessary supplies.

Once the room is prepared, the sonographer has the first patient come in and lie on the exam table. The sonographer answers any questions the patient has about the procedure. Then the sonographer spreads gel on the area where the scan will be performed. The gel allows high-frequency sound waves to be transmitted below the surface of the skin. These sound waves are then transmitted through a transducer, which is a hand-held device that the sonographer passes over the area being scanned. The sound waves are reflected by the scanned area and are then sent to a computer, where they are translated into an image displayed on a monitor. The sonographer watches the monitor and makes any necessary adjustments to the equipment during the scan.

After the scan, the sonographer reviews the images to ensure the area has been clearly and adequately documented. He or she selects the best images, takes measurements, and may even evaluate the preliminary results of the scan. Then the sonographer writes a summary for the doctor, including any abnormalities he or she notes in the scan. After cleaning the room and equipment, the sonographer is ready for the next patient. Shanna, the sonographer in Florida, says that in a typical eight-hour workday, she sees eight to seventeen patients.

Education and Training

Sonographers can enter the field with an associate's degree in ultrasound technology or diagnostic medical sonography, which typically takes two years at an accredited community college or university. Many colleges, technical institutes, and some hospitals offer accredited one-year certification programs. The Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs accredits diagnostic medical sonography educational programs in the United States.

High school students who are interested in this career should take classes in anatomy, computer science, math, physics, and physiology, which will help prepare them for a sonography training program. Such programs typically include courses in anatomy, applied sciences, medical terminology, and pathology—the study of diseases and their causes. Sonography training programs also include classes related to procedures in a student's particular field, such as abdominal sonography or gynecologic sonography.

In addition to course work, most programs include hands-on training. Students practice scanning one another in order to learn how to identify internal organs and spot any abnormalities. In addition to practicing on each other, students earn credit while working under an experienced sonographer in a doctor's office, hospital, or diagnostic laboratory. They usually rotate through different facilities in order to get a broad range of experience. Kristy Le, a student in the diagnostic medical sonography program at Montgomery College in Maryland, describes her first day of hands-on training doing sonography scans: "It was pretty cool. I got to do a few scans on my own; it was pretty exciting. I saw new scans that I'd never seen before, such as the thyroid. . . . So, yeah, it was a pretty good day."¹⁰

There is no national requirement for sonographers to be certified, but some states and most employers do require professional certification. To become a registered diagnostic medical sonographer after graduating from an accredited program, a candidate must pass an exam covering general sonography principles and

Advice from a Sonographer

“If you are considering a career in sonography, do your research. Find out if you are suited for this profession. Get into a sonography department and walk a mile in a sonographer’s shoes. Make the effort to ensure you are entering a field you desire because it is not without its daily challenges and frustrations. Enjoying this profession for what it is makes the day-to-day issues seem more like speed bumps rather than mountains.”

—Samantha Sawyer, sonographer

Quoted in Ultrasound Schools Info, “Interview with Sonographer Samantha Sawyer,” 2019. www.ultrasoundschoolsinfo.com.

instruments, an exam covering a specialty area of the candidate’s choice, and a physics exam. The American Registry for Diagnostic Medical Sonography administers the exam and awards certification. Many employers also require sonographers to have cardiopulmonary resuscitation certification as well.

Skills and Personality

Because diagnostic medical sonographers work directly with patients and doctors, they need strong interpersonal skills. Some patients may be in pain or be nervous about what the scan will reveal, so sonographers should be prepared to calm and reassure patients. Sonographers should be empathetic and enjoy working with and helping people. “I chose sonography because I love the patient interaction, and as cliché as it sounds, I love caring and helping people and getting to be a part of saving their lives,”¹¹ explains Naomi, a student in the sonography program at Kettering College in Ohio.

Sonographers also need excellent communication skills to be able to explain the procedure to patients and discuss the images with the doctor. Being detail oriented and having excellent

A Stimulating Job

“I’m an ultrasound tech and I do like my job. But, be prepared to get a little dirty working closely with sick people. There can be high stress with the level of disease and abnormal exams you encounter. But, the day flies by, never are you bored. You are always learning, bettering your skills and highly stimulated.”

—Diane, ultrasound technician

Quoted in American Institute of Medical Sciences & Education, “20 Reasons Why Being an Ultrasound Tech Rocks,” *AIMS Blog*, June 19, 2019. www.aimseducation.edu.

critical-thinking skills are also a must, as is a passion for figuring out solutions to problems. “My professors often say that if you love mysteries and getting to the bottom of things, then you’ll love sonography,”¹² says Naomi.

Sonographers need to be in good physical shape and have good manual dexterity. The job requires them to be on their feet much of the day, so physical stamina is a must. In addition, sonographers sometimes need to lift or reposition patients who need assistance, which requires upper-body strength.

Working Conditions

Most diagnostic medical sonographers work a five-day, forty-hour week and keep regular hours. Some sonographers may work evenings, weekends, or overnight because they are employed in facilities that are open around the clock. Those who work in a hospital typically must be on call once or twice a week, available to show up night or day to perform an emergency scan.

Sonographers spend their days in dimly lit rooms using diagnostic imaging machines and computers. They may also perform sonography scans at the bedside of a hospital patient who cannot be transported. They are on their feet most of the day and sometimes must lean or bend over patients to help reposition them for

a scan, which sometimes can lead to muscular pain or repetitive motion injuries on the job. Using proper techniques for these tasks, however, can help minimize the risk of pain or injuries on the job.

Employers and Pay

Most diagnostic medical sonographers are employed by hospitals and doctors' offices, but some also work at outpatient care centers or medical and diagnostic laboratories. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the average wage for full-time sonographers was about \$56,850 per year in 2018. The lowest-paid 10 percent earned less than \$29,340, and the highest-paid 10 percent earned more than \$93,100. Salaries for sonographers vary based on their education, certifications, area of expertise, and years of experience. Depending on the employer, full-time sonographers may also receive benefits such as vacation pay, sick leave, and retirement contributions.

What Is the Future Outlook for Diagnostic Medical Sonographers?

The BLS predicts that employment for diagnostic medical sonographers will grow by 17 percent through 2026, which is much faster than the average for all occupations. Part of this growth is due to the large and aging baby boomer population, which will increase the need for imaging scans to diagnose medical conditions such as blood clots and heart disease. There will continue to be a nationwide demand for sonographers for the foreseeable future, and those who are skilled in more than one specialty will have an even greater job outlook.

Find Out More

American Institute of Ultrasound in Medicine (AIUM)

website: www.aium.org

The AIUM is a multidisciplinary organization of more than nine thousand health care providers (including diagnostic medical

Source Notes

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Interview with a Dental Hygienist

Patty Ledgerwood is a dental hygienist who works in San Diego, California. She has worked as a hygienist for thirty-four years. Although she earned a bachelor's degree, one can enter the field with an associate's degree. She answered questions about her career by email.

Q: Why did you become a dental hygienist?

A: When I was in high school I worked as a dental assistant and I really enjoyed working in the dental field. At the time I was considering becoming a teacher. I soon learned that my work as a hygienist is about teaching people about their health. I was also attracted to this field due to the flexibility of the career. It was a great opportunity to work as much or as little as I wanted to and I felt this would be great for raising kids or pursuing other interests as well as my career.

Q: How did you train for your career? What did you find most challenging and/or most surprising about the course work, training, and exams?

A: I attended a four-year university and earned a bachelor's degree of science in dental hygiene. I was surprised by how much chemistry we needed to take. It is important however, to have this background because we are administering anesthesia. There is also a lot of biology-based classes, which is to be expected in a medical field. Even with all the course work, I feel the most challenging are the state board exams. These are timed practical exams where we find our own patients and clean their teeth and then get checked and graded on these. While this is a very stressful process there is a good percentage of people who pass.

Other Jobs in Health Care

Cardiovascular technologist	Nuclear medicine technologist
Clinical laboratory technician	Nursing assistant
Clinical laboratory technologist	Occupational therapy assistant
Dental assistant	Optician
Dental laboratory technician	Orderly
Dispensing optician	Paramedic
Health information technician	Personal care aide
Home health aide	Physical therapist aide
Laboratory animal caretaker	Psychiatric aide
Magnetic resonance imaging technologist	Radiation therapist
Medical assistant	Radiologic technologist
Medical equipment preparer	Respiratory therapist
Medical laboratory technician	Surgical technologist
Medical records technician	Vascular technologist
Medical transcriptionist	Veterinary assistant
	Veterinary technician

Editor's note: The online *Occupational Outlook Handbook* of the US Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics is an excellent source of information on jobs in hundreds of career fields, including many of those listed here. The *Occupational Outlook Handbook* may be accessed online at www.bls.gov/ooh.

Index

Note: Boldface page numbers indicate illustrations.

- Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools, 39
- Alcaraz, Barbara, 38
- American Academy of Emergency Medicine (AAEM), 28–29
- American Association of Pharmacy Technicians (AAPT), 50–51
- American Council of Academic Physical Therapy (ACAPT), 67
- American Dental Association (ADA), 9, 13
- American Dental Education Association (ADEA), 13
- American Dental Hygienist Association (ADHA), 14
- American Institute of Ultrasound in Medicine (AIUM), 21–22
- American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA), 43
- American Medical Technologists (AMT), 58
- American Nurses Association (ANA), 36
- American Physical Therapy Association (APTA), 67
- American Registry for Diagnostic Medical Sonography (ARDMS), 22
- American Society for Clinical Pathology, 55
- American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP), 46, 51
- Associated Bodyworks and Massage Professionals (ABMP), 43
- Brown, Randy, 44, 48
- Buffam, Kayla, 24, 25
- Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)
- on dental hygienist, 12
 - on diagnostic medical sonographer, 21
 - on emergency medical technician, 28
 - on growth in health care industry, 5–6
 - on licensed practical nurse, 35
 - on massage therapist, 42
 - on pharmacy technician, 50
 - on phlebotomist, 58
 - on physical therapist assistant, 66
- Center for Phlebotomy Education, 58–59
- Christy, Kristy, 34
- Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education (CAPTE), 62, 67