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The Growing Influence of NPs and PAs New Opportunities for Pharma Marketers To Drive Brand Growth



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With widespread physician shortages across the U.S. and increased demand for care, the number of Nurse Practitioners (NPs) and Physician Assistants (PAs) has been growing at a rapid pace. These healthcare providers (HCPs) are filling a critical void in the industry by helping to improve access, outcomes, and patient satisfaction, and have emerged as key decision-makers and prescribers. While they have historically been an underutilized target audience for pharma brands, much of that is changing. Pharma marketers are increasingly tapping into the unique opportunity to educate NPs and PAs, using tailored messaging that emphasizes a brand's competitive advantage, and developing effective campaigns that stand out.



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NP vs. PA: What's the Difference?

NPs and PAs are Advanced Practice Providers (APPs), which also include other licensed, non-physician providers including certified nurse midwives (CNM), clinical nurse specialists (CNS), and certified registered nurse anesthetists (CRNA).

Compared to MDs, NPs, in particular, have a different approach to care. They can diagnose and treat conditions, but they focus more on disease prevention and health management, patient education, and counseling. While MDs focus on complex cases and an illness alone, for example, NPs focus on the impact of the diagnosis. MDs also generally have more knowledge about complicated conditions than PAs and can perform surgery, which PAs can only assist with.

| Categories | Medical Doctor (MD) | Nurse Practitioner (NP) | Physician Assistant (PA) |
|----------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Education / Degree | Bachelor's Degree & Doctor of Medicine (MD) or Doctor of Osteopathy (DO) | Bachelor's & Master's Degree in Nursing; Nurse Practitioner License | Bachelor's & Master's Degree in Physician Assistant; Physician Assistant-Certified (PA-C) |
| Total Post High School Education | 8 years | 6-8 years | 6-7 years |
| Residency | 8 years | 6-8 years | 6-7 years |
| Recertification | Annual board certification maintenance required | 1000 professional practice hours and 12 continued education credits annually OR exam every 5 years | 100 education hours every 2 years and exam every 10 years |
| Supervision | Independent | Independent | Must be supervised by an MD/DO |
| Prescribe Medications | Yes | Yes | Yes, when supervised and delegated by a physician |
| Physical Exams | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Order and Interpret Tests | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Perform Surgeries | Yes | Assist | Assist |
| Physical Exams | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Diagnose and Treat Illness | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Best for who? | Everyone | Everyone | Everyone |

Comparison of MDs, NPs, and PAs

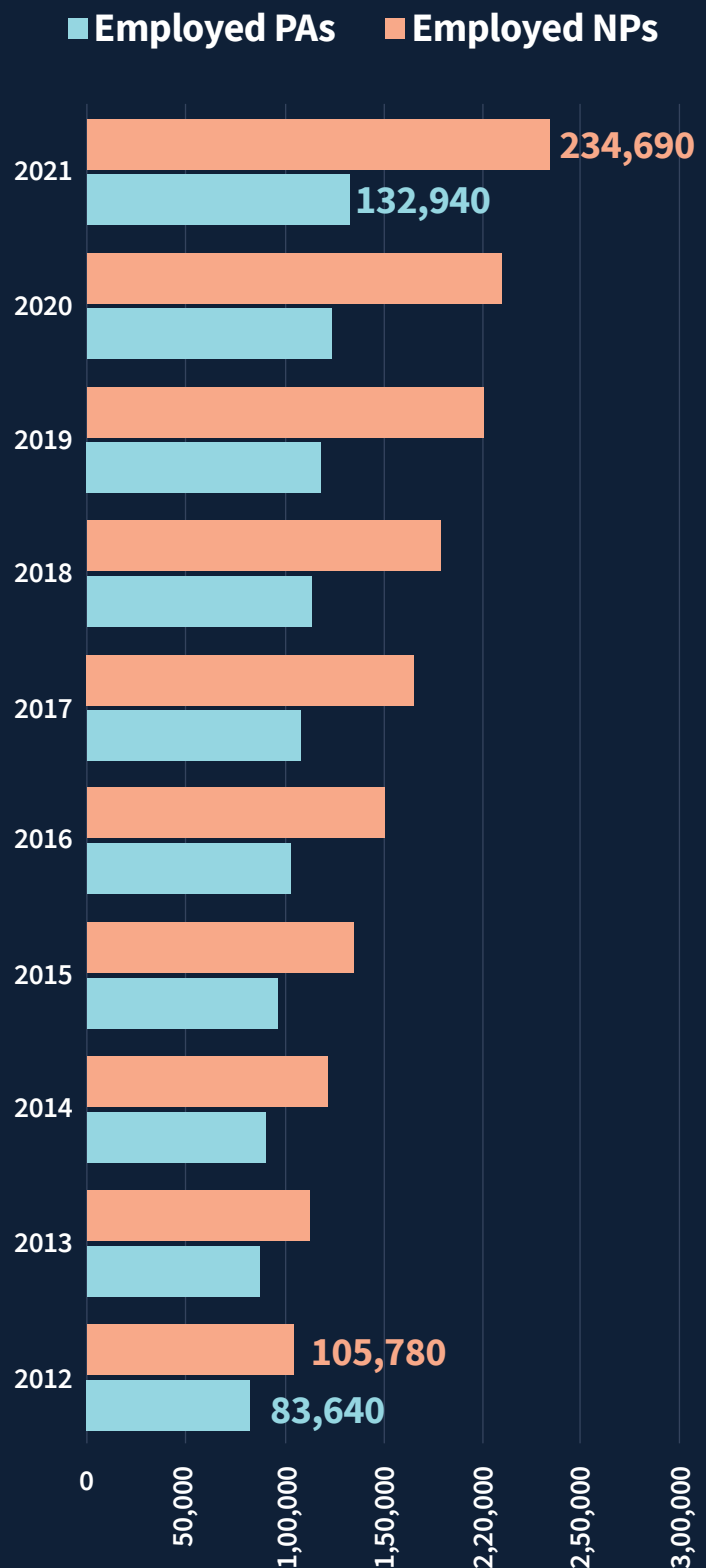
Source: CMMHealth.org

The Growing Prevalence of NPs and PAs

Similar to all areas of healthcare, the U.S. is facing a shortage of physicians. By 2034, the nation is expected to experience a shortfall of between 37,800 and 124,000 physicians, including those in both primary and specialty care.

Due to the increased demand and attractive salaries for NPs and PAs, the two workforces have experienced rapid growth in recent years, with both the number of employed professionals and graduates increasing over the last decade. There are more than 280,000 NPs and 145,000 PAs in the workforce and together, they provide more than one-quarter of healthcare visits.

Workforce growth also shows no sign of slowing down. The number of NPs and PAs is projected to grow by 66% and 37%, respectively, between 2024 and 2034. For pharma marketers, this surge presents a valuable opportunity to engage this audience with tailored, educational brand messaging.



Growth in employed PAs and NPs, 2012-2021
Source: AAMC Research and Action Institute

Addressing Critical Care Gaps

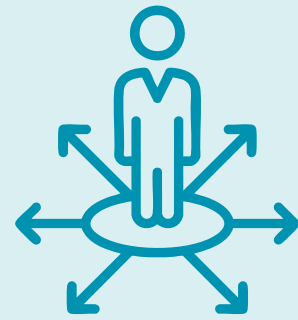
The shortage of physicians across the U.S. has led to long wait times. In fact, 40% of adults in the U.S. have experienced a “longer than reasonable” wait for healthcare. Among those surveyed, 26% reported waiting more than two months to see a provider.

Patients living in rural communities are disproportionately affected by healthcare disparities. Compared to urban areas, rural communities have fewer primary and specialty care physicians with only 10% of physicians practicing in those areas.

Lack of access prevents patients from receiving preventative care, increases the risk for complications and comorbidities, leads to poor outcomes, and may even cause people to give up on seeking care altogether.

NPs and PAs are filling a void by bridging gaps in care, delivering a wide range of services to meet the diverse needs of patients, and driving better access and outcomes.

While NPs have historically been an integral part of primary care, they are increasingly making their way into specialty care, because of higher pay, according to experts. Between 2008 and 2016, the number of specialty practices that employed NPs and PAs increased 22%.



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Expanded Scope of Practice¹

While NPs and PAs have historically been required to have MD oversight to make prescribing decisions, new state laws have increasingly allowed them to make these decisions autonomously. Today, they have different levels of supervision and prescriptive authority:

- In over half of the states, NPs have Full Practice Authority (FPA), meaning they can treat patients and prescribe medication independently. In 22 states, they practice in collaboration with, or under, MD supervision.
- In some states, NPs have more prescriptive authority than PAs. NPs can prescribe controlled substances in many states; however, certain states prohibit them from prescribing Schedule II controlled substances.
- All PAs are required to have some level of physician supervision; however this can vary by state. They are authorized to prescribe medications in all jurisdictions where they are licensed, except Puerto Rico. Some states also have restrictions on the medications they can prescribe such as Schedule II controlled substances.

The expanded scope of practice of APPs has allowed them to be key decision-makers. In 2023, non-physicians wrote 27% of healthcare prescriptions. Between 2016 and 2023, while the overall number of drug prescriptions increased by just over 50%, those written by NPs, PAs, and CNMs increased by 144%. As workforce shortages and care access issues continue to persist, more states are likely to grant prescriptive authority to NPs and PAs.

¹These descriptions on scope of practice are provided for informational purposes only. Providers should confer with their own legal counsel to appropriately determine their respective, applicable scope of practice.



New Opportunities For Pharma Brands

Despite the growing prevalence of NPs and PAs, their presence in specialty care, and their influence on prescribing, they are an often underutilized audience for pharma marketers. Yet including them in the media plan is critical for several reasons.

Influence: the increased number of providers alone makes them an important audience. Plus, since they have a particular focus on patient education and counseling, NPs and PAs are an ideal group to target with up-to-date, relevant information and messaging that will influence their prescribing decisions.

Increasing complexity: with an aging baby boomer population and increased chronic disease burden, they are caring for more complex cases. Since more are practicing in specialty care settings, they need the latest information on medical advancements in all therapeutic areas.

Opportunity for differentiated messaging: products that have a patient-centered advantage, such as medication routes of administration or quality of life preferences, may resonate more with this group compared to MDs.



Drug Lookup Trends

To further understand APPs and patient care, we analyzed a dataset looking at the volume of their searches in the epocrates app and the most frequently searched therapeutic areas. In 2024, we found more than 50 million searches were conducted by NPs and PAs in the epocrates mobile app, spanning a wide range of therapeutic areas.

Searches by NPs/PAs in the epocrates mobile app by therapeutic area, 2024

| Therapeutic Area | Number of Searches |
|------------------------|--------------------|
| Antibiotics | 6.3M |
| Anxiety/Panic Disorder | 5.8M |
| Pain Management | 4.9M |
| Depression | 4.4 M |
| Allergy/Asthma | 3.7M |
| Heart Failure | 3.6M |

Source: epocrates analytics

Certain specialties stand out for their rapid growth in drug lookups per NP and PA user on the epocrates app. This surge highlights increasing clinical complexity and interest in these areas—and points to where APPs are most actively engaged in patient care decisions.

These trends signal growing momentum in these fields and a rising demand for relevant treatment information at the point of care.

Top therapeutic areas by growth in drug lookups in the epocrates mobile app per NP/PA user, 2021-2024

| Therapeutic Area | Drug Lookups Per User (NP / PA) |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Atopic Dermatitis/Eczema | +71% |
| Obesity | +35% |
| Hemophilia | +24% |
| Psoriasis | +21% |

Source: epocrates analytics

Speaking Their Language: Personalized Messaging for APPs

Although nurse practitioners and physician assistants share many responsibilities with physicians, their roles, priorities, and patient interactions can differ in subtle but important ways. Recognizing and addressing these nuances is essential for developing an effective media strategy.

Tailoring the Message: Reaching MDs vs. NPs and PAs

While much of your messaging will resonate across all healthcare providers, fine-tuning campaigns to reflect what matters most to each audience can significantly boost relevance and impact. For APPs, messaging that emphasizes patient-centered outcomes—such as quality of life and ease of treatment—is especially compelling.

| MDs | NPs and PAs |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Clinical trial results and efficacy | Patient quality of life (QoL) |
| HCP professional education content | Patient education opportunities |
| Mechanism of action (MOA) information | Ease of administration |

By aligning messaging with each group’s focus, you can more effectively engage both MDs and APPs—amplifying the impact of your outreach across the care team.



Conclusion

As the presence and prescribing authority of nurse practitioners and physician assistants continue to grow, it's essential for pharma marketers to acknowledge their pivotal role in delivering and managing patient care.

Historically underutilized in marketing strategies, NPs and PAs represent a powerful opportunity for brands seeking to influence prescribing behavior and drive clinical impact. To reach them effectively, marketers must develop messaging that aligns with their unique perspectives and professional goals—and partner with advertising platforms that understand how to engage this influential audience with precision and purpose.

About epocrates

epocrates, an athenahealth company, is a trusted clinical intelligence platform, built to power clinical decisions across every stage of care. Designed for clarity, speed, and practical use, epocrates delivers essential drug and clinical insights at the point of care — helping healthcare professionals make confident, evidence-based decisions when it matters most. Our platform also offers opportunities for reaching clinicians through digital advertising.



Ready to learn more about digital advertising to HCPs on epocrates?

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<https://www.epocrates.com/advertise>

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