

Chapter 1

Becoming an Emergency Medical Technician

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Welcome to the world of emergency medical services, or EMS! This is a noble profession. The training is challenging, the work unpredictable, and you won't become rich performing the job. But you will have the privilege of helping people when they need it the most — when doing the right thing at the right time may very well save a life. Even in instances when the job isn't that dramatic, the simple care, comfort, and words of reassurance you provide may be all someone needs to feel better.

This chapter gives you the basics on what EMTs do, how to become one, and how to maintain your certification.

Understanding What Being an EMT Means

An emergency medical technician, or EMT, provides a basic level of emergency and non-urgent patient care. Some EMTs are paid for their work, while others volunteer their time, especially in more rural parts of the United States. In most states, the EMT is the minimum level of training required to provide ambulance transportation or care for the patient in the ambulance. The following sections explain what EMTs do, where they work, and the value of EMT training.

Note: The profession is transitioning from using the older term EMT-Basic (EMT-B) to simply EMT. This book uses the term EMT, but you can assume that the two terms are interchangeable.

What does an EMT do?

The EMT is one component of an EMS system, which may use other trained prehospital professionals to care for patients as well. The four general levels of EMS providers in the United States are

- ✓ **Emergency medical responder (EMR):** 48–60 hours of training. An EMR provides minimum, basic first aid. Lifeguards, police officers, and some firefighters are often required to have this certification.

- ✓ **Emergency medical technician (EMT):** 120–180 hours of training. This level serves as the foundation for higher certification levels. An EMT provides basic emergency care, such as oxygen administration, spinal immobilization, and splinting. Many states require this certification as a minimum to work as a staff member on an emergency ambulance. Many firefighters and police officers also earn EMT certification so that they can perform basic emergency care as part of their duties.
- ✓ **Advanced emergency medical technician (AEMT):** 160–300 hours of training beyond EMT. This training can vary quite widely from one state to the next. In addition to the skill set of the EMT, AEMTs may perform intravenous therapy, administer a limited set of medications, and manage a patient’s airway at a higher level than an EMT.
- ✓ **Paramedic:** 1,100 hours or more of training beyond EMT. In addition to the skill set of the AEMT, the paramedic receives more information about human anatomy and physiology, the pathophysiology of disease, and trauma, and can administer a greater array of emergency medications. Paramedics can insert endotracheal tubes to help patients breathe and perform various types of electrical therapy to help heart rhythm disturbances.

In the majority of states, you have to be certified first as an EMT before taking on additional training to become an AEMT or paramedic. All EMS providers function under medical direction; usually a physician oversees the clinical practice of each level of responder.

An EMT does a patient assessment, which includes taking the patient’s history and vital signs, and performing a physical examination. The care an EMT provides includes oxygen administration, artificial ventilation, cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), splinting of broken bones, and immobilization for spinal injuries. EMTs are trained to assist patients with specific types of emergency medication that are prescribed for them, such as nitroglycerin for chest pain, an inhaler for breathing difficulties, and an epinephrine autoinjector (EpiPen) for *anaphylaxis*, a severe, life-threatening allergic reaction. Some states permit EMTs to do more procedures, such as monitor oxygen levels in the blood (*oximetry*), test blood glucose levels (*glucometry*), and administer certain emergency drugs.



Because the practice of the EMT isn’t consistent throughout all states, the test questions don’t evaluate your knowledge of things like glucometry. The questions assume only that you were taught to the foundational level as determined by the EMS National Scope of Practice, which is a federal document that describes what each level of EMS provider is permitted to perform. You can see this document at www.ems.gov/education/EMSScope.pdf.

Where do EMTs work?

EMTs traditionally work in ambulances, caring for and transporting patients from one location to the next: from a hospital bed to the person’s home, from an emergency care scene to a hospital, or even from one hospital to another.

In emergency response systems, an EMT may work alongside another EMT, or partner with a more advanced level provider such as an AEMT or paramedic. Firefighters and police officers who are EMT-certified may respond to an emergency call and arrive sooner than the ambulance that may be farther away.

You often find EMTs working as part of an emergency-department team or working at a clinic. It’s not unusual for the EMT to receive additional training in skills such as *phlebotomy* (blood draws) or recording a patient’s *electrocardiogram* (tracing of the heart’s electrical activity).

Wilderness and search-and-rescue teams often deploy EMTs because their skill set is ideal for providing care in remote areas. As in the hospital or clinic setting, EMTs may receive more training to better handle these conditions.

Can you use EMT training for other purposes?

Many students become EMTs to help prepare them for a career in the healthcare field. The information is valuable and serves as a foundation to build upon. EMTs go on to become AEMTs, paramedics, nurses, physician assistants, doctors, or other allied health professionals.

Even if you're not planning to further your education or pursue a career as an EMT, the training you receive is invaluable. Learning to stay calm, manage a scene, and provide basic care in a medical emergency makes you a more valued member of society.

Walking through the Steps of Becoming an EMT

As you find out in the following sections, you need to complete a few steps before you can apply your skills and knowledge as an EMT. **Note:** Because emergency medical services are regulated at the state level, these steps can vary from one state to the next. Always check your state's EMS website for the details.

Finding and completing a class

EMT classes are conducted by a wide variety of institutions. Your local community college may offer the class for college credit. Hospitals may also provide the training. The local EMS agency or fire department may offer the course, especially if it's to help train volunteers. Private organizations provide the training as well.



Searching online usually yields a list of classes closest to you. You can also check your state's office of EMS to see whether it offers a listing of approved training programs. If you feel adventurous, try visiting your local EMS or fire station and introduce yourself to the EMTs on duty. Ask whether they have any suggestions or recommendations on where to take a course.

After you find a class that meets your needs, you complete your training program. This means passing all the tests your instructor provides, including all the practical examinations. Seems obvious, but you really can't proceed to the next step without completing this one. Chapter 2 provides the scoop on finding a class and meeting its requirements.

Passing the National Registry Exam

A desire to pass the National Registry Exam may be the main reason you have this book. The National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians (NREMT) is a nongovernmental organization that serves as the national EMS certification organization. The computer-based NREMT examination has been exhaustively evaluated for its ability to measure your EMT knowledge. Part of the NREMT examination is a practical exam, often given by your training program. Passing the NREMT exam means that you have a level of understanding that experts call "entry-level competent." You discover more about the exam in Chapter 3.

Note: Although most states require you to pass the NREMT exam, not all do. States that don't mandate the NREMT exam usually require you to complete a state-level examination. You can check the NREMT website (www.nremt.org/nremt/about/stateReciprocityMap.asp) to see whether your state requires the NREMT exam.

Finishing the process

Passing the NREMT exam doesn't authorize you to function as an EMT. That responsibility resides with your state. You typically present your NREMT credentials to the state EMS office, complete an application, and pay a fee to become state-certified. Because EMTs enter people's homes and businesses as part of the job, as well as solicit personal information about patients, many states require that you submit to a criminal background check.

To work as an EMT, an employer may require you to pass a medical examination and/or pass a test regarding the operation of an ambulance. You should check with these agencies to see what they require.

Maintaining Your EMT Certification

All states require you to renew your EMT certificate periodically. The time frame varies from one part of the country to the next, but many states have a two-year interval. Some states require you to use the NREMT renewal process to recertify. Other states have their own renewal process. You should consult your state EMS office for exact details.

If your state requires you to follow the NREMT renewal process, you need to do one of the following every two years:

✔ **Take a refresher course plus continuing education classes:** This option requires you to complete a combination of an approved, 24-hour EMT refresher course and an additional 48 hours of ongoing continuing education classes.

- **EMT refresher class:** The refresher class is exactly that — a course designed to refresh your original knowledge base and, in some cases, verify your skill competency. It's designed to renew baseline knowledge that you may not have used or may have forgotten over your certification period. A written test is usually given at the end of the class to confirm that you possess the appropriate baseline knowledge and skill set for EMT practice (sometimes a practical test is also given).
- **Continuing education classes:** Receiving your NREMT card doesn't signal the end of your training; in fact, it's really the beginning! Medicine is a continuously evolving science and art. New discoveries occur every day, and eventually some make it into the world of prehospital medicine.

Continuing education classes help increase your body of EMT knowledge. They can be traditional, in-classroom courses; online courses; or a combination of the two, called a *hybrid*. Regardless of how the instruction is delivered, continuing education courses keep you up to speed in the world of prehospital medicine.

Refresher and continuing education classes are offered by a variety of organizations, such as EMS agencies, fire departments, community colleges, and private education providers. You can search the web for organizations near you. Also, several providers provide online continuing education; you need to check whether the courses they teach are accepted in your state.

✔ **Retake the NREMT exam:** This option gives you the ability to renew your registration by retaking the initial exam. This is a good choice if your state requires fewer continuing education hours than the NREMT renewal process, and you'd prefer to take only the minimum number of hours necessary to maintain your certification. You can find additional information at the NREMT website (www.nremt.org).

A valid CPR card is also necessary. In addition, you must be working as an EMS professional and have your skills verified by your agency's training program director, director of operations, or physician medical director. Complete information can be found at www.nremt.org/nremt/about/reg_basic_history.asp#EMT_Recertification.

States that don't require the NREMT renewal process have their own recertification process. Check with your state's EMS office for details. A listing of state EMS offices can be found at www.nremt.org/nremt/about/emt_cand_state_offices.asp.

