Veterinary Technician or Technologist

Professional Activities

Owners of pets and other animals today expect superior veterinary care. To provide this service, veterinarians use the skills of *veterinary technologists* and *technicians*, who perform many of the same duties for a veterinarian that a nurse would for a physician. Although specific job duties vary by employer, there is often little difference between the tasks carried out by technicians and technologists, despite differences in formal education and training. However, most technicians work in private clinical practice while many technologists have the option to work in more advanced research-related jobs.

Veterinary technologists and technicians typically conduct clinical work in a private practice under the supervision of a licensed veterinarian. Veterinary technologists and technicians often perform various medical tests and treat and diagnose medical conditions and diseases in animals. For example, they may perform laboratory tests such as urinalysis and blood counts, assist with dental care, prepare tissue samples, take blood samples, and assist veterinarians in a variety of other diagnostic tests. While most of these duties are performed in a laboratory setting, many are not. For example, some veterinary technicians record patients' case histories, expose and develop x rays and radiographs, and provide specialized nursing care. In addition, experienced veterinary technicians may discuss a pet's condition with its owners and train new clinic personnel. Veterinary technologists and technicians assisting small-animal practitioners usually care for small pets, such as cats and dogs, but can perform a variety of duties with mice, rats, sheep, pigs, cattle, monkeys, birds, fish, and frogs. Very few veterinary technologists work in mixed animal practices where they care for both small pets and large, nondomestic animals.

Besides working in private clinics and animal hospitals, some veterinary technologists and technicians work in research facilities under the guidance of veterinarians or physicians. In this role, they may administer medications, prepare samples for laboratory examinations, or record information on an animal's genealogy, diet, weight, medications, food intake, and clinical signs of pain and distress. Some may sterilize laboratory and surgical equipment and provide routine postoperative care. Occasionally, veterinary technologists vaccinate newly admitted animals and may have to euthanize seriously ill, severely injured, or unwanted animals.

While the goal of most veterinary technologists and technicians is to promote animal health, some contribute to human health, as well. Veterinary technologists occasionally assist veterinarians in implementing research projects as they work with other scientists in medical-related fields such as gene therapy and cloning. Some find opportunities in biomedical research, wildlife medicine, livestock management, pharmaceutical sales, and increasingly, in biosecurity and disaster preparedness.

While people who love animals get satisfaction from helping them, some of the work may be unpleasant, physically and emotionally demanding, and sometimes dangerous. Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics show that full-time veterinary technologists and technicians experienced a work-related injury and illness rate that was much higher than the national average. At times, veterinary technicians must clean cages and lift, hold, or restrain animals, risking exposure to bites or scratches. These workers must take precautions when treating animals with germicides or insecticides. The work setting can be noisy.

Veterinary technologists and technicians who witness abused animals or who euthanize unwanted, aged, or hopelessly injured animals may experience emotional stress. Those working for humane societies and animal

shelters often deal with the public, some of whom might react with hostility to any implication that the owners are neglecting or abusing their pets. Such workers must maintain a calm and professional demeanor while they enforce the laws regarding animal care.

In some animal hospitals, research facilities, and animal shelters, a veterinary technician is on duty 24 hours a day, which means that some work night shifts. Most full-time veterinary technologists and technicians work about 40 hours a week, although some work 50 or more hours a week.

Educational Requirements

There are primarily two levels of education and training for entry to this occupation: a 2-year program for veterinary technicians and a 4-year program for veterinary technologists.

Most entry-level veterinary technicians have a 2-year associate degree from an American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA)-accredited community college program in veterinary technology in which courses are taught in clinical and laboratory settings using live animals. Currently, about 20 colleges offer veterinary technology programs that are longer and that culminate in a 4-year bachelor's degree in veterinary technology. These 4-year colleges, in addition to some vocational schools, also offer 2-year programs in laboratory animal science. About 10 schools offer distance learning.

In 2009, about 160 veterinary technology programs in 45 States were accredited by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA). Graduation from an AVMA-accredited veterinary technology program allows students to take the credentialing exam in any State in the country.

Those interested in careers as veterinary technologists and technicians should take as many high school science, biology, and math courses as possible. Science courses taken beyond high school, in an associate or bachelor's degree program, should emphasize practical skills in a clinical or laboratory setting.

Technologists and technicians usually begin work as trainees under the direct supervision of a veterinarian. Entry-level workers whose training or educational background encompasses extensive hands-on experience with diagnostic and medical equipment usually require a shorter period of on-the-job training.

Each State regulates veterinary technicians and technologists differently; however, most States require them to pass a credentialing exam following coursework. Passing the State exam assures the public that the technician or technologist has sufficient knowledge to work in a veterinary clinic or hospital. Candidates are tested for competency through an examination that includes oral, written, and practical portions and that is regulated by the State Board of Veterinary Examiners or the appropriate State agency. Depending on the State, candidates may become registered, licensed, or certified. Most States, however, use the National Veterinary Technician (NVT) exam. Prospects usually can have their passing scores transferred from one State to another, so long as both States use the same exam.

As veterinary technologists and technicians often deal with pet owners, communication skills are very important. In addition, technologists and technicians should be able to work well with others, because teamwork with veterinarians and other veterinary technicians is common. Organizational ability and the ability to pay attention to detail also are important. As they gain experience, technologists and technicians take on more responsibility and carry out more assignments with little veterinary supervision. Some eventually may become supervisors.

Academic Programs

Fox College
Joliet Junior College
Parkland College
Rend Lake College
Rockford Career College
Southeastern Illinois College

Employment/Salary Outlook

Pet owners are becoming more affluent and more willing to pay for advanced veterinary care because many of them consider their pet to be part of the family. This growing affluence and view of pets will continue to increase the demand for veterinary care. The vast majority of veterinary technicians work at private clinical practices under veterinarians. As the number of veterinarians grows to meet the demand for veterinary care, so will the number of veterinary technicians needed to assist them.

The number of pet owners who take advantage of veterinary services for their pets is expected to grow over the projection period, increasing employment opportunities. The availability of advanced veterinary services, such as preventive dental care and surgical procedures, also will provide opportunities for workers specializing in those areas as they will be needed to assist licensed veterinarians. The growing number of cats kept as companion pets is expected to boost the demand for feline medicine and services. Further demand for these workers will stem from the desire to replace veterinary assistants with more highly skilled technicians in animal clinics and hospitals, shelters, boarding kennels, animal control facilities, and humane societies.

Continued support for public health, food and animal safety, and national disease control programs, as well as biomedical research on human health problems, also will contribute to the demand for veterinary technologists, although the number of positions in these areas is fewer than in private practice.

Excellent job opportunities are expected because of the relatively few veterinary technology graduates each year. The number of 2-year programs has recently grown to about 160, but due to small class sizes, fewer than 3,800 graduates are anticipated each year, a number that is not expected to meet demand. Additionally, many veterinary technicians remain in the field less than 10 years, so the need to replace workers who leave the occupation each year also will produce many job opportunities.

Veterinary technologists also will enjoy excellent job opportunities due to the relatively few graduates from 4-year programs—about 500 annually. However, unlike veterinary technicians who usually work in private clinical practice, veterinary technologists will have better opportunities for research jobs in a variety of settings, including biomedical facilities, diagnostic laboratories, wildlife facilities, drug and food manufacturing companies, and food safety inspection facilities.

Despite the relatively few number of graduates each year, keen competition is expected for veterinary technician jobs in zoos and aquariums, due to expected slow growth in facility capacity, low turnover among workers, the limited number of positions, and the fact that the work in zoos and aquariums attracts many candidates.

Employment of veterinary technicians and technologists is relatively stable during periods of economic recession. Layoffs are less likely to occur among veterinary technologists and technicians than in some other occupations because animals will continue to require medical care.

State and National Wages

Location	Pay Period	2021		
		Low	Median	High
United States	Hourly	$13.64	$17.72	$23.13
	Yearly	$28,370	$36,850	$48,100
Illinois	Hourly	$14.09	$18.24	$24.82
	Yearly	$29,310	$37,950	$51,620

State and National Trends

United States	Employment		Percent Change	Job Openings [1]
	2020	2030		
Veterinary Technologists and Technicians	114,400	131,500	15	10,400
Illinois	**Employment**		**Percent Change**	**Job Openings [1]**
	2018	**2028**		
Veterinary Technologists and Technicians	4,060	4,680	15%	410

[1]Job Openings refers to the average annual job openings due to growth and net replacement.

Professional Organizations

American Veterinary Medical Association (avma.org)
Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges (aavmc.org)
National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America (navta.net)

References

Occupational Outlook Handbook, U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (http://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/veterinary-technologists-and-technicians.htm)

O*NET Online (https://www.onetonline.org/link/summary/29-2056.00)

CareerOneStop (https://www.careeronestop.org/Toolkit/Careers/Occupations/occupation-profile.aspx?keyword=Veterinary%20Technologists%20and%20Technicians&onetcode=29205600&location=Illinois)

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