



How to become a Veterinary Surgeon: a career guide

Introduction

Becoming a veterinary surgeon offers a truly rewarding career opportunity with excellent long-term prospects. Vets are in demand and once you have completed your training you should be able to find a position within a few months.

But what does becoming a vet actually entail? Many simply see vets as 'doctors for animals', however, while it's certainly true that most people's experience of dealing with vets comes from taking their pet to a private surgery, that's just one potential path vets can go down.

Veterinary medicine is a broad church and aside from clinics, vets work in research, public health, the government, the military, and in sports like horse and greyhound racing. They work for animal charities, in the zoo and the wildlife sector, plus many more.

If you have an interest and a passion for animals, you can find the right career within the veterinary profession for you.

This guide has been put together to help those interested in becoming a veterinary surgeon to understand the steps needed. We've crafted this with the help of a qualified vet to answer any potential questions and to help those decide whether or not this is the right career for them.

A quick note on terms. We use the term 'vet' throughout to refer to a veterinary surgeon. Registered veterinary nurses are briefly mentioned, but it's a completely different job role, with different skills and different qualifications required.



Training, Qualifications, and Development

Put simply, it's not easy to become a vet. It requires excellent grades, hard work, training and commitment.



All vets operating in the UK must be a member of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS). To become a member, you must complete a five-year course at the vet schools of one of the following universities: Bristol, Cambridge (six years), Edinburgh, Glasgow, Liverpool, London (the Royal Veterinary College), Surrey or Nottingham.

One should always check each university's acceptance requirements in detail, but in general, the following is necessary.

GCSE

At a minimum, a C in English Language, Maths, and Science. Most will expect A grades, considering how competitive the process is.

AS/A-levels

Some universities accept AS-levels, but generally at half the value of a full A-level. Nearly all will demand an A in A-level Chemistry, though.

A-level requirements vary, but only slightly. The minimum expected is AAB with at least one, preferably two or more, in Chemistry, Physics, and Mathematics.

An A-level in an unrelated non-science subject can be accepted but it must be an academic subject. Think History or Politics, not General Studies or Drama.

Some universities offer a six-year course for those who don't meet initial requirements. The first year prepares the student for the five-year degree. [The University of Nottingham](#) and the [Royal Veterinary College](#) are two examples of universities who provide this gateway opportunity, for those with varying background situations.



Veterinary Care Assistant and Registered Veterinary Nurse

Please be aware that there is a clear distinction between veterinary surgeons and veterinary care assistants and veterinary nurses. As mentioned, veterinary surgeons are required to go to veterinary school for 5-6 years after completing their A-Levels. Assistants and registered veterinary nurses do not have to go through such vigorous training, however, this is reflected in salary and levels of responsibility.

Those wishing to become registered veterinary nurses can start their training within some vet practices- typical requirements are for 5 GCSEs at grades A* to C, including English Language, Mathematics and a Science Subject. If you do not have the required GCSEs, you may wish to consider the [Level 2 Diploma for Veterinary Care Assistants](#) course. This qualification, along with English and Maths GCSEs (A* to C) or Functional Skills Level 2 in English and Maths will be an acceptable alternative.

The People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA) was set up to treat pets whose owners struggle to afford private clinics. It's grown to become the largest private employers of veterinary surgeons and doctors in the UK.

Apprenticeships for both veterinary care assistants and registered veterinary nurses are run by many veterinary practices, taking place in their own hospitals. As an example, the PDSA offers such training programmes - for more details you can see [their site](#), but in summary, a care assistant apprenticeship takes 12 to 18 months to complete and concludes with a Level 2 diploma in Veterinary Care Assistance.

The Apprentice Veterinary Nurse role takes two years to do and those completing will have a Level 3 Diploma in Veterinary Nursing (Small Animal Pathway), plus Functional Skills Maths Level and Functional Skills English Level 2.

The UK government's [apprenticeship site](#) has information on other veterinary apprenticeships that exist. They consist of clinically based training alongside at least two years of work in a veterinary nurse training practice. Training in specialist roles such as a small animal or equine veterinary nurse is also available.



Essential Skills for vets

A passion and an interest in animals may seem obvious, but potential vets need to like and be comfortable with all sorts of creatures. If you love dogs, but hate cats, then perhaps think again! Remember, vets handle all sorts of animals, including exotic pets and foreign species that may find their way into the UK.

An intelligent and quick-thinking mind is key. Are you a problem solver? Can you think quickly in potentially dangerous or upsetting situations? Are you confident?

Training and becoming a vet is only the first step. No matter how much learning you do, there will be times when you can't find solutions to an issue or clinical problem – real medicine does not always pan out like the textbooks suggest!

Communication skills are vital. You must be able to speak to your colleagues in a professional and accurate manner. You may have to deal with animals owners in very difficult circumstances where sensitivity is crucial. You could also be responsible for writing letters and emails to owners, and helping write content for newsletters and websites.

Vets that become partners or directors in practices will need business and management skills too.

Those considering becoming surgeons should evaluate whether they have the manual dexterity for performing surgery, and other tasks like biopsies and giving injections. Animals come in all shapes and sizes, so another thing to consider is whether you have the skills to handle animals, who may often be distressed, safely and humanely. Knowledge and understanding of animal behaviour is another vital aspect to becoming a successful veterinary surgeon.

As well, being a vet is not always a 9-5 job. You may be required to work unsociable hours, weekends, and in many roles provide emergency cover throughout the night. More on this later.



Tips for getting into vet school

Veterinary students are a unique type of student and university interviewers will be looking for prospects that are able to handle the demanding academic, physical and emotional challenges that years of training and a successful career will provide.

First off, you need a strong academic record. Requirements do change so it's always worth checking out the places where you would like to study and keep an eye on their entrance qualifications. That's just one part, though, as academic grades only get you so far.

The interviewers will be looking for candidates who demonstrate a broad range of interests and personal experiences - as well as those who will contribute to the vet school in other ways.

Come prepared to an interview having undertaken a long list of work experience/voluntary work. This could be the experience of working on farms, at veterinary practices, rescue centres, kennels, catteries, laboratories, zoos or other conservation work.

If you do not have this experience, get it! Most of these organisations and businesses would be delighted to have a young, eager new face helping out and it's a really rewarding experience for everyone. It's also a good chance to make links and connections for further down the road in your career.

But remember, make sure the experience is useful. Four weeks experience where you didn't actually learn anything is far less valuable than even one day of real working experience dealing directly with animals.

Interviews are your one big chance to demonstrate just how much you want to study veterinary medicine at university. Don't get caught out by questions about your personal statement that you don't remember or have exaggerated. Interviewers are likely to use the content of your personal statement as a guide to what questions they ask, so be ready to explain further anything you have written about.

Be prepared to also answer questions about topical/ethical issues affecting the veterinary profession. These could be: What do you think about the ethics of organ transplants in pets? When do you think it is appropriate to euthanase a pet? When is it not appropriate?

Interviewers won't necessarily judge you on your opinion but want to know that you are aware of issues affecting the profession and have an opinion on these matters.

And be honest. If you don't know the answer to a question then don't try and talk your way out of it. Do your research on current issues affecting the profession and have some questions of your own to ask too.

Useful links for keeping abreast on the latest in the veterinary profession:

[Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons](#)

[British Cattle Veterinary Association](#)

[British Small Animal Veterinary Association](#)

[Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons](#)

[British Equine Veterinary Association](#)

[British Veterinary Association](#)



Hours and Income

The average starting salary in the UK for graduates is £25,000 which compares favourably to the actual UK average salary in 2015 of £26,500. However, both figures are skewed by a small percentage of people earning significantly higher amounts. Many graduates (as a whole, not vets) are reported to be working for only £16,000 and full-time minimum wage jobs bring in just a little over £13,000 a year.

Newly-qualified veterinary surgeons, though, can reassure themselves that the many years of studying was worth it. On average, they earn £31,150 a year. In more expensive areas, wages may be higher and likewise in cheaper areas, slightly lower. The lowest you could expect would be around £26,000.

This compares favourably with other top degrees like Dentistry (£30,000), Medicine (£28,000) and Engineering (£26,500).

With further experience, after a few years, this can rise to around £44,000 a year depending on the size of the practice. Senior partners in a practice can earn over £50,000 a year and it's worth remembering some employers provide accommodation and transport costs too.

Vets working for the government can earn up to £55,556 as a Veterinary Officer in inner London.

Please note, these are figures generally related to typical veterinary career choices. More specialist fields can and do pay more.



Working Life



Many, if not most, vet jobs will come attached to a practice. The majority of these will offer a 24 hours, 365 days a year service. As mentioned above, the typical 9-5 working day does not apply to many vets.

However, the EU Working Time Directive which came into place five years ago has had a big impact on the work of vets. Because no-one can work more than 48 hours a week - normally averaged over a period of 17 weeks - unless workers opt-out, vets are no longer expected to work unsociable hours unless they choose to.

Becoming a vet is still a vocational career path to take, but it is not always the case anymore that vets are expected to work, for example, one in four nights and weekends on top of the 9-5, throughout their career.

Most vets in practice will generally finish work around 6-7pm, however, all veterinary practices are obliged to offer their clients round-the-clock care. To get around this, a lot of vets now outsource the 'out-of-hours' cover to a separate vet group. The largest such 'out-



of-hours' provider is a nationwide group called Vets Now which provides veterinary surgeons to the surgeries who need them as and when. This comes at a cost of course but is invaluable to many vets who do not like the challenges caused by 'out-of-hours' duties to their work-life balance. Having said this, working nights as a vet can be a highly lucrative and fulfilling career option and one which many chose to do in the early years shortly after qualifying. Just like for junior doctors working in the A&E of human hospitals, many essential skills only become available through exposure to emergency work and students should probably think again if they want to enter the veterinary profession without any commitment to at least undertake some 'out-of-hours' work during their career.

In short, vets will typically be responsible for the prevention of disease, diagnosis, and treatment for animals who are sick or injured. They could be expected to advise and educate on hygiene, welfare and quarantines. Surgeons will perform operations as well as euthanise animals where necessary.

A large number of vets work in practices and by gaining experience, they often end up buying into or setting up a practice. Locum work is in high demand too.

Although most vets are based at a practice, working conditions vary. They might work with livestock on farms, at zoos, travel to customer's homes or travel in mobile vans like many PDSA vets do.

Those vets working in sports like horse racing would be expected to travel to different meetings each day and ensure the well-being of all runners both before and after the race, as well as provide care to any animals injured whilst running.

There's a high level of responsibility from being a vet and it's not for the faint-hearted. Vets find themselves having to work in difficult emotional situations, thus, must deflect the sadness and grief they feel away from the job, and deal sensitively with owners of animals who may have to be put down or who die while being treated. Combined with long hours it can be a stressful job.

There's also a physical risk of injury from animals, particularly for vets working with livestock and equine species.

Don't think it's all bad, though! Vets consistently rank highly for job satisfaction in work surveys - the challenge and stimulus the role provides makes for a big positive.



Career Progression

Most vets, like doctors, stay within their field for the whole of their working life, largely because of the level of training and dedication required to become qualified. Having said this, as a vet you are always learning and no day is the same.

A requirement of the RCVS is that vets must demonstrate continued professional development (CPD). Essentially, this is a responsibility to ensure that vets maintain and develop the knowledge and skills relevant to their professional practice and competence. Vets regularly study to gain further qualifications in areas that interest them, for example, oncology and dermatology.

The recommended minimum CPD is 105 hours over a rolling three year period with an average of 35 hours per year. Most veterinary surgeons will do considerably more than this with a view to further advancing their skill sets and salary.

There are other careers paths available too, though. Some vets return to universities as teachers and lecturers, bringing their skills and experience to a new audience, however, because there are so few universities in the UK that offer veterinary science as a course, opportunities can be limited so some move abroad to teach. Another option, and one for those looking to continue along the academic route, is to return to university and undertake research in a veterinary science of their choice. This is a popular choice and one which allows you to truly specialise in a certain area of veterinary science that excites and interests you. You will see an increase in future potential earnings too.

There is also the opportunity to move into the broader veterinary science field and become an expert specialising in areas as diverse as animal behaviour, zoology, conservation and animal biology. Disease impact teams also use vets. The threat of diseases originating in animals like SARS, Ebola and Zika highlight the need for quality people from a veterinary background.

Consultation work is also popular, even more so with climate change and overpopulation shaping global debates. Food suppliers use vets to assess risks to livestock and for advice on welfare, vaccinations, and inoculations.

Working with corporations that provide veterinary care, test human drugs for safety, or produce animal-related products is another possible avenue.

Essential Links

Please find below a selection of reading materials and sources we encourage you to read which will give you further information and advice on becoming a vet.

[National Careers Service - becoming a vet](#)

[British Veterinary Association](#)

[Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons](#)

[Pet Protectors - Want to be a vet?](#)

[Find a Veterinary university course in the UK with UCAS](#)





A final note from our qualified vet and founder of Vetsure (cat and dog insurance provider), Dr Ashley Gray MA VetMB PhD MRCVS.

“It is important that people who are considering becoming a vet understand all of the challenges that the job can bring, as well as all the wonderful joy that comes with the care for animals. In particular, veterinary medicine is not an exact science. Veterinary students often start out by believing that if they follow the textbook precisely then outcomes for the patient and the client will usually be good.

However, the real world is sadly often not like that. Many cases do not work out as planned and sometimes a patient’s illness can leave us baffled. At these times, vets need to manage the expectations of the client - communication and the management of expectations becomes critical to the outcome for the patient.

Emotions can, and usually do play an enormous role. And sometimes these emotions can seem overwhelming. For a lot of newly graduated vets, having to regularly deal with these aspects of the role can be a surprise and a considerable challenge.

There is no doubt in my mind, however, that the Veterinary Profession offers one of the most rewarding careers for talented and caring people - and a unique opportunity to combine the application of science with a role that genuinely allows you to care for animals and their owners alike.”

