Internists are personal physicians who provide long-term, comprehensive care in the office and the hospital, managing both common and complex illnesses in adolescents, adults, and the elderly. Internists are trained in the diagnosis and treatment of cancer, infections, and diseases affecting the heart, blood, kidneys, joints, and digestive, respiratory and vascular systems. They are also trained in the essentials of primary care internal medicine which incorporates an understanding of disease prevention, wellness, substance abuse, mental health, and effective treatment of common problems of the eyes, ears, skin, nervous system, and reproductive organs. An internal medicine physician’s primary responsibilities include health maintenance and disease screening, the diagnosis and care of acute and chronic medical conditions, management of patients with multiple, complex medical problems, and serving as consultants to other disciplines such as surgery, obstetrics, and family medicine. An internist’s work is characterized by extensive knowledge and skill in diagnosis and treatment.

The numbers of generalist residency graduates have declined each year since 1998, causing concern about future shortages says a study published in Health Affairs. Furthermore, between 2005 and 2025 the population above age 65 will increase 73 percent, the same group who seeks care from generalists at twice the rate of those under the age of 65. Using 2005 levels as a benchmark, a 20-27 percent shortfall, about 35,000 to 44,000 generalists, is anticipated by 2025. The major decline is attributed to more and more graduates in internal medicine sub-specializing. To increase the number of generalists, the authors recommend that reimbursement reform realigning incentives to make the “medical home” financially viable should be at the top of the list.