

Nursing

Nurse



Career Description

Nursing is the largest health care occupation, with 2.4 million Registered Nurses (RNs) in the nation's workforce. RNs provide a variety of essential care services that include treating patients, educating patients and the public about various medical conditions, and providing advice and emotional support to patients' family members. RNs record patients' medical histories and symptoms, help to perform diagnostic tests and analyze results, operate medical machinery, administer treatment and medications, and help with patient follow-up and rehabilitation. RNs teach patients and their families how to manage illness or injury, including post-treatment home care needs, diet and exercise programs, and self-administration of medication and physical therapy. Some RNs also are educated to provide grief counseling to family members of critically ill patients. RNs work to promote general health by educating the public on various warning signs and symptoms of disease and where to go for help. RNs also might run health screening or immunization clinics, blood drives, and public seminars on various conditions.

RNs can specialize in one or more patient care specialties. The most common specialties can be divided into roughly four categories—by work setting or type of treatment; disease, ailment, or condition; organ or body system type; or population. RNs may combine specialties from more than one area—for example, pediatric oncology or cardiac emergency—depending on personal interest and employer needs.

RNs may specialize by work setting or by type of care provided:

- *Ambulatory care nurses* treat patients with a variety of illnesses and injuries on an outpatient basis, either in physicians' offices or in clinics or through electronic telehealth media
- *Critical care nurses* work in critical or intensive care hospital units and provide care to patients with cardiovascular, respiratory, or pulmonary failure
- *Emergency or trauma, nurses* work in hospital emergency departments and treat patients with life-threatening conditions caused by accidents, heart attacks, and strokes
- *Holistic nurses* provide care such as acupuncture, massage and aroma therapy, and biofeedback, which are meant to treat patients' mental and spiritual health in addition to their physical health
- *Home health care nurses* provide at-home care for patients who are recovering from surgery, accidents, and childbirth
- *Hospice and palliative care nurses* provide care for, and help ease the pain of, terminally ill patients outside of hospitals
- *Infusion nurses* administer medications, fluids, and blood to patients through injections into patients' veins
- *Long-term care nurses* provide medical services on a recurring basis to patients with chronic physical or mental disorders
- *Medical-surgical nurses* provide basic medical care to a variety of patients in all health settings
- *Occupational health nurses* provide treatment for job-related injuries and illnesses and help employers to detect workplace hazards and implement health and safety standards
- *Perianesthesia nurses* provide preoperative and postoperative care to patients undergoing anesthesia during surgery

- *Perioperative nurses* assist surgeons by selecting and handling instruments, controlling bleeding, and suturing incisions
- *Psychiatric nurses* treat patients with personality and mood disorders
- *Radiologic nurses* provide care to patients undergoing diagnostic radiation procedures such as ultrasounds and magnetic resonance imaging
- *Rehabilitation nurses* care for patients with temporary and permanent disabilities
- *Transplant nurses* care for both transplant recipients and living donors and monitor signs of organ rejection

RNs specializing in a particular disease, ailment, or condition are employed in virtually all work settings, including hospitals, physicians' offices, outpatient treatment facilities, home health care agencies, and private practices. These specialties include:

- Addictions
- Developmental disabilities
- Diabetes management
- Genetics
- HIV/AIDS
- Oncology
- Wound, ostomy, and continence

RNs specializing in treatment of a particular organ or body system usually are employed in specialty physicians' offices or outpatient care facilities, although some are employed in hospital specialty or critical care units. These specialties include:

- Cardiology and vascular medicine
- Dermatology
- Gastroenterology
- Gynecology
- Nephrology
- Neuroscience
- Ophthalmology
- Orthopedics
- Otorhinolaryngology
- Respiratory disorders
- Urology

Finally, RNs may specialize by providing preventive and acute care in all health care settings to various segments of the population, including newborns (neonatology), children and adolescents (pediatrics), adults, and the elderly (gerontology or geriatrics). RNs also may provide basic health care to patients in correctional facilities, schools, summer camps, and the military.

Most RNs work as staff nurses, providing critical health care services along with physicians, surgeons, and other health care practitioners. Some RNs choose to become advanced practice nurses, who often are considered primary health care practitioners and work independently or in collaboration with physicians. These would include:

- Clinical nurse specialists
- Nurse anesthetists
- Nurse midwives
- Nurse practitioners

Some nurses pursue careers that require little or no direct patient contact, although most of these positions still require an active RN license:

- Case managers
- Forensics nurses
- Infection control nurses
- Legal nurse consultants
- Nurse administrators
- Nurse educators
- Nurse informaticists
- Nurse researchers

RNs also may work as health care consultants, public policy advisors, pharmaceutical and medical supply researchers and salespersons, and medical writers and editors.



Employment Characteristics

Though most RNs (59%) still work in hospitals, nurses are employed in all types of settings in which health care is provided. Home health and public health nurses travel to patients' homes, schools, community centers, and other sites. RNs may spend considerable time walking and standing. Patients in hospitals and nursing care facilities require 24-hour care; consequently, nurses in these institutions may work nights, weekends, and holidays. RNs also may be on call—available to work on short notice. Nurses who work in office settings are more likely to work regular business hours. About 23 percent of RNs worked part time in 2004, and 7 percent held more than one job.

Nursing has its hazards, especially in hospitals, nursing care facilities, and clinics, where nurses may care for individuals with infectious diseases. RNs must observe rigid, standardized guidelines to guard against disease and other dangers, such as those posed by radiation, accidental needle sticks, chemicals used to sterilize instruments, and anesthetics. In addition, they are vulnerable to back injury when moving patients, shocks from electrical equipment, and hazards posed by compressed gases. RNs who work with critically ill patients also may suffer emotional strain from observing patient suffering and from close personal contact with patients' families.

About three out of five nursing jobs in 2004 were in hospitals, in inpatient and outpatient departments. Other nurses worked in physicians' offices, nursing care facilities, home health care services, employment services, government agencies, and outpatient care centers. The remainder worked mostly in social assistance agencies and educational services, both public and private.



Salary

Median annual earnings of registered nurses were \$57,280 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$47,710 and \$69,850. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$40,250, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$83,440. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of registered nurses in May 2006 were as follows:

• Employment services	\$64,260
• General medical and surgical hospitals	\$58,550
• Home health care services	\$54,190
• Offices of physicians	\$53,800
• Nursing care facilities	\$52,490

Many employers offer flexible work schedules, child care, educational benefits, and bonuses. Advanced practice nurses and those

holding positions requiring master's or doctoral preparation often earn annual salaries exceeding \$100,000.

For more information, refer to www.ama-assn.org/go/hpsalary.



Employment Outlook

Job opportunities for RNs in all specialties are expected to be excellent. Employment of registered nurses is expected to grow much faster than average for all occupations through 2016, and, because the occupation is very large, many new jobs will result. In fact, registered nurses are projected to create the second largest number of new jobs among all occupations. Thousands of job openings also will result from the need to replace experienced nurses who leave the occupation through retirement, especially as the median age of the registered nurse population continues to rise.

Much faster-than-average growth will be driven by technological advances in patient care, which permit a greater number of health problems to be treated, and by an increasing emphasis on preventive care. In addition, the number of older people, who are much more likely than younger people to need nursing care, is projected to grow rapidly.

Employers in some parts of the country and in certain employment settings are reporting difficulty in attracting and retaining an adequate number of RNs, primarily because of an aging RN workforce and a lack of younger workers to fill positions. Enrollments in nursing programs at all levels have increased more rapidly in the past couple of years as students seek jobs with stable employment. Many qualified applicants are being turned away, however, because of a shortage of nursing faculty to teach classes. The need for nursing faculty will only increase as more instructors near retirement. Many employers also are relying on foreign-educated nurses to fill open positions.

Even though employment opportunities for all nursing specialties are expected to be excellent, they can vary by employment setting. For example, employment is expected to grow more slowly in hospitals—which comprise health care's largest industry—than in most other health care settings. While the intensity of nursing care is likely to increase, requiring more nurses per patient, the number of inpatients (those who remain in the hospital for more than 24 hours) is not likely to grow significantly. Patients are being discharged earlier, and more procedures are being done on an outpatient basis, both inside and outside hospitals. Rapid growth is expected in hospital outpatient facilities, such as those providing same-day surgery, rehabilitation, and chemotherapy.

Despite the slower employment growth in hospitals, job opportunities should still be excellent because of the relatively high turnover of hospital nurses. RNs working in hospitals frequently work overtime and night and weekend shifts and also treat seriously ill and injured patients, all of which can contribute to stress and burnout. Hospital departments in which these working conditions occur most frequently—critical care units, emergency departments, and operating rooms—generally will have more job openings than other departments.

To attract and retain qualified nurses, hospitals may offer signing bonuses, family-friendly work schedules, or subsidized training. In addition, a growing number of hospitals are experimenting with voluntary online bidding to fill open shifts, at premium wages. This can decrease the amount of mandatory overtime that nurses are required to work.

More and more sophisticated procedures, once performed only in hospitals, are being performed in physicians' offices and in outpatient care centers, such as freestanding ambulatory surgical and emergency centers. Accordingly, employment is expected to grow

much faster than average in these places as health care in general expands. However, RNs may face greater competition for these positions because they generally offer regular working hours and more comfortable working environments.

Employment in nursing care facilities is expected to grow faster than average because of increases in the number of elderly, many of whom require long-term care. In addition, the financial pressure on hospitals to discharge patients as soon as possible should produce more admissions to nursing care facilities. Job growth also is expected in units that provide specialized long-term rehabilitation for stroke and head injury patients, as well as units that treat Alzheimer's victims.

Employment in home health care is expected to increase rapidly in response to the growing number of older persons with functional disabilities, consumer preference for care in the home, and technological advances that make it possible to bring increasingly complex treatments into the home. The type of care demanded will require nurses who are able to perform complex procedures.

Generally, RNs with at least a bachelor's degree will have better job prospects than those without a bachelor's. In addition, all four advanced practice specialties—clinical nurse specialists, nurse practitioners, midwives, and anesthetists—will be in high demand, particularly in medically underserved areas such as inner cities and rural areas. Relative to physicians, these RNs increasingly serve as lower-cost primary care providers.



Educational Programs

Award, Length. The three major educational paths to registered nursing are 1) a bachelor's of science degree in nursing (BSN), 2) an associate degree in nursing (ADN), and 3) a diploma. BSN programs, offered by colleges and universities, take about 4 years to complete, ADN programs, offered by community and junior colleges, take about 2 to 3 years to complete, and diploma programs, administered in hospitals, last about 3 years.

Many RNs with an ADN or diploma later enter bachelor's programs to prepare for a broader scope of nursing practice, through an RN-to-BSN program. Similarly, accelerated master's degree programs in nursing also are available. These RN-to-MSN programs combine 1 year of an accelerated BSN program with 2 years of graduate study. In addition, accelerated BSN programs, lasting 12 to 18 months, are available for individuals who have a bachelor's or higher degree in another field and who are interested in moving quickly into nursing.

A bachelor's degree often is necessary for advanced clinical and administrative positions and is a prerequisite for admission to graduate nursing programs in research, consulting, and teaching, and all four advanced practice nursing specialties—clinical nurse specialists, nurse anesthetists, nurse midwives, and nurse practitioners. Individuals who complete a bachelor's receive more education in areas such as communication, leadership, and critical thinking, all of which are becoming more important as nursing care becomes more complex. Additionally, bachelor's degree programs offer more clinical experience in nonhospital settings.

Prerequisites. High school students considering a nursing career should take science, mathematics, and communications courses. Nurses should be caring, sympathetic, responsible, and detail oriented. They must be able to direct or supervise others, correctly assess patients' conditions, and determine when consultation is required. They need emotional stability to cope with human suffering, emergencies, and other stresses.

Curriculum. All nursing education programs include classroom instruction and supervised clinical experience in hospitals and

other health care facilities. Students take courses in anatomy, physiology, microbiology, chemistry, nutrition, psychology and other behavioral sciences, and nursing. Coursework also includes the liberal arts for ADN and BSN students.

Supervised clinical experience is provided in hospital departments such as pediatrics, psychiatry, maternity, and surgery. A growing number of programs include clinical experience in nursing care facilities, public health departments, home health agencies, and ambulatory clinics.

Advanced Training. All four advanced practice nursing specialties currently require at least a master's degree, and the profession is moving toward doctoral preparation for these roles. Most programs last about 2 years and require a BSN degree for admission; some programs require at least 1 to 2 years of clinical experience as an RN. Upon completion of a program, most advanced practice nurses become nationally certified in their area of specialty. In some states, certification in a specialty is required in order to practice that specialty.



Licensure, Certification, Registration

In all states and the District of Columbia, students must graduate from an approved nursing program and pass a national licensing examination, known as the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX-RN), to obtain a nursing license. Nurses may be licensed in more than one state, either by examination or by the endorsement of a license issued by another state. Currently 23 states participate in the Nurse Licensure Compact Agreement, which allows nurses to practice in member states without recertifying. All states require periodic renewal of licenses, which may involve continuing education.



Inquiries

Education, Careers, Resources

American Association of Colleges of Nursing
One Dupont Circle NW, Suite 530

Washington, DC 20036
www.aacn.nche.edu

American Nurses Association
8515 Georgia Avenue, Suite 400
Silver Spring, MD 20910
www.nursingworld.org

National League for Nursing
61 Broadway
New York, NY 10006
www.nln.org

Licensure

National Council of State Boards of Nursing
111 East Wacker Drive, Suite 2900
Chicago, IL 60611
www.ncsbn.org

Program Accreditation

(Note: The programs listed in this *Directory* are those accredited at the baccalaureate and/or master's level by the following organization.)

Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education
American Association of Colleges of Nursing
One Dupont Circle NW, Suite 530
Washington, DC 20036
www.aacn.nche.edu