

# Survey Insights: Specialty Switching by Nurse Practitioners

## Implications for patient safety and scope of practice policy

### Introduction

Recent results from a national survey of nurse practitioners, conducted by the American Medical Association, offer new insights into the previously unexamined issue of specialty switching by nurse practitioners. The survey explored whether respondents switched specialties during their career and the perceived ease of switching specialties within the profession. Respondents were also asked about the need for additional education or training before or while practicing in new specialties, and their reliance on physicians for one-the-job learning.

Findings from the survey revealed that switching specialties is perceived as both common and easy among nurse practitioners. Of those surveyed, 35% reported changing specialties at least once during their career, typically without completing formal training in the respective specialty. Finally, the survey revealed that nurse practitioners frequently rely on physicians for on-the-job learning to practice in their current specialty. These findings underscore the critical role of state laws that uphold physician-led care, including requirements for physician supervision of or collaboration with nurse practitioners. These laws are essential for ensuring patient access to safe, high-quality care.

### Key Research Findings<sup>1</sup>

#### 1. A significant number of nurse practitioners change specialties during their career.

- **35% of nurse practitioners surveyed have switched specialties** at least once in their career (22% once, 7% twice, 6% 3 or more times).
- The likelihood of switching specialties is consistent across years in practice, however, those practicing in a specialty five years or less are more likely to have switched specialties than those who have been practicing in the specialty for 6 years or more.
- This is consistent with another key finding: those who switched specialties spent about **4 years in their prior specialty before switching**. This is true across specialties.

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#### 2. Respondents view switching specialties as common and easy.

- 78% of nurse practitioners surveyed said it was **common** and 65% said it is **easy** to switch specialties.

#### 3. Formal training is rarely pursued.

- 66% believe additional certifications or training should be required to practice in a new specialty.

<sup>1</sup> Data is from a national survey conducted by Public Opinion Strategies from July 16-August 4, 2025. The survey consisted of 502 nurse practitioners with a credibility interval of  $\pm 4.99$  percent.

- Yet, 65% think on-the-job training is sufficient rather than formal education.
- When asked whether they **personally** would obtain additional training or certifications to practice in a new specialty, 47% said they would be willing to go back to school, while 50% preferred learning on the job.

#### 4. Nurse practitioners overwhelmingly rely on physicians for on-the-job training.

- 59% of respondents received additional training from a physician to practice in their current specialty, including learning how to:
  - assess, evaluate and diagnose patients,
  - order and interpret diagnostic tests,
  - develop treatment plans,
  - prescribe medications, or
  - perform in-office diagnostic or surgical procedures
- Despite the heavy reliance on physicians for on-the-job training, the majority of nurse practitioners feel that specialty switching either has no impact on the cost of care or decreases the cost of care.

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#### 5. There is a continued shift toward online-only programs.

- 83% of nurse practitioner respondents practicing for less than five years received at least some of their education online—23% attended fully online programs.
- For nurse practitioners practicing for 6-10 years, 14% attended online-only programs, and for those in practice 16 or more years, 79% were educated in-person and only 2% attended fully online programs.

These findings reveal a dramatic shift in educational modalities for nurse practitioners, with most recent graduates receiving all or part of their education online—a **trend that raises concerns about consistent clinical training and preparedness**.

### Core Insights from Survey

- **35% of nurse practitioner respondents switched specialties at least once**
- **Specialty switching is perceived as easy to do and common in the profession**
- **When switching specialties, respondents preferred on-the-job training over formal education or training in the new specialty**
- **Nurse practitioners rely on physicians for on-the-job training in specialties**
- **There is a continued upward trend of nurse practitioners completing their educational program online**

## Significance and Policy Implications

Available data suggests a misalignment between the education and training of many nurse practitioners and the specialty in which they practice. For example, data reported by the American Association of Nurse Practitioners (AANP) show that 89% of nurse practitioners are trained and certified in primary care, yet multiple workforce studies show that only one-quarter to one-third practice in primary care and a growing number are practicing in specialties such as emergency medicine, cardiology, and dermatology.<sup>2</sup> While optional specialty certifications are available for multiple specialties, 92.8% of nurse practitioners lack these specialty certifications, further suggesting this misalignment.<sup>3</sup>

Findings from the AMA survey provide new evidence demonstrating the prevalence of specialty switching by nurse practitioners and support the conclusion that most nurse practitioners are practicing in medical specialties without any formal preparation, raising important questions about their capacity to independently deliver safe and high-quality patient care in these settings.

Importantly, the AMA survey data also confirms that nurse practitioners depend on physicians for guidance, mentorship, and training, especially when transitioning to new specialties where they have limited or no formal preparation. Removing physician supervision or collaboration requirements for nurse practitioners risks undermining the quality of care and patient safety, especially as nurse practitioners move into specialties without formal preparation.

**Altogether, these findings underscore the vital importance of maintaining physician-led care, particularly requirements for physician supervision of and collaboration with nurse practitioners.**

**We urge lawmakers to uphold the physician-led, team-based model of care. Ensuring physician supervision and collaboration is critical to maintaining patient safety and delivering the high-quality care that patients expect and deserve.**

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<sup>2</sup> American Association of Nurse Practitioners. *2024 Nurse Practitioner Practice Report*. 2024; Health Resources and Services Administration. (2018) NCHWA Nursing Workforce Dashboard. Oregon Center for Nursing (2020). *Primary Care Workforce Crisis Looming in Oregon: Nurse Practitioners Vital to Filling the Gap, But Not Enough to Go Around*. Portland, OR, Oregon Center for Nursing, pg. 16; Martiniano R, Wang S, Moore J. *A Profile of New York State Nurse Practitioners*, 2017. Rensselaer, NY: Center for Health Workforce Studies, School of Public Health, SUNY Albany; October 2017; South Dakota Center for Nursing Workforce (March 11, 2025). *South Dakota Nursing Workforce: 2025 Supply and Employment Characteristics* p.31.

<sup>3</sup> American Association of Nurse Practitioners. *2024 Nurse Practitioner Practice Report*. 2024.