

Health Care - Nursing

Nurses provide and coordinate patient care, educate patients and the public about various health conditions, and provide advice and emotional support to patients and their family members.

Work Environment

Registered nurses work in hospitals, physicians' offices, home healthcare services, and nursing care facilities. They also work in correctional facilities, schools, summer camps, and with the military.

Most registered nurses work in well-lit, comfortable healthcare facilities. Home health and public health nurses travel to patients' homes, schools, community centers, and other sites.

Registered nurses may spend a lot of time walking, bending, stretching, and standing. They are vulnerable to back injuries because they must often lift and move patients. The work of registered nurses may put them in close contact with people who have infectious diseases, and they often come in contact with potentially harmful and hazardous drugs and other substances. Therefore, registered nurses must follow strict, standardized guidelines to guard against diseases and other dangers, such as radiation, accidental needle sticks, or the chemicals they use to sterilize instruments.

Because patients in hospitals and nursing care facilities need round-the-clock care, nurses in these settings usually work in rotating shifts, covering all 24 hours. They may work nights, weekends, and holidays. They may also be on call.

Nurses who work in offices, schools, and other places that do not provide 24-hour care are more likely to work regular business hours

Most nurses work fulltime and about 20% of them work in part time jobs.

How to get Qualified

Registered nurses usually take one of three education paths: a bachelor's degree in nursing, an associate's degree in nursing, or a diploma from an approved nursing program. Registered nurses must also become licensed by passing a national licensing examination.

In all nursing education programs, students take courses in nursing, anatomy, physiology, microbiology, chemistry, nutrition, psychology and other social and behavioral sciences, as well as in liberal arts. BSN programs typically take four years to complete; ADN and diploma programs usually take two to three years to complete.

All programs also include supervised clinical experience in hospital departments such as pediatrics, psychiatry, maternity, and surgery.

Bachelor's degree programs usually include more training in the physical and social sciences, communication, leadership, and critical thinking, which is becoming more important as nursing practice becomes more complex. They also offer more clinical experience in nonhospital settings. A bachelor's degree or higher is often necessary for administrative positions, research, consulting, and teaching.

Other Qualifications/skills required:

Critical-thinking skills. Registered nurses must be able to assess changes in the health state of patients, including when to take corrective action and when to make referrals.

Compassion. Registered nurses should be caring and sympathetic, characteristics that are valuable when treating patients.

Detail oriented. Registered nurses must be responsible and detail oriented because they must make sure that patients get the correct treatments and medicines at the right time.

Emotional stability. Registered nurses need emotional stability to cope with human suffering, emergencies, and other stresses.

Organizational skills. Nurses often work with multiple patients with various health needs, and organizational skills are critical to ensure the patient is given proper care.

Patience. Registered nurses should be patient so they can provide quality care under stressful or hectic circumstances.

Speaking skills. Registered nurses must be able to talk effectively with patients to correctly assess their health conditions. Nurses need to clearly explain how to take medication or give other instructions. They must be able to work in teams with other health professionals and communicate the patients' needs.

Some nurses move into the business side of healthcare. Their nursing expertise and experience on a healthcare team equip them to manage ambulatory, acute, home-based, and chronic care businesses.

Job Outlook

Employment of registered nurses is expected to grow 26 percent from 2010 to 2020, faster than the average for all occupations. Growth will occur primarily because of technological advancements; an increased emphasis on preventative care; and the large, aging population who will demand more healthcare services as they live longer and more active lives.

The financial pressure on hospitals to discharge patients as soon as possible should mean more people admitted to extended and long-term care facilities and more need for home healthcare. As the baby boomers grow older, there will be greater demand for home healthcare.

In addition, because many older people want to be treated at home or in residential care facilities, registered nurses will be in demand in those settings. Job growth is also expected in facilities that provide long-term rehabilitation for stroke and head injury patients, as well as facilities that treat people with Alzheimer's disease (memory loss, dementia).

