

Nurses, Registered Professional



Occupational Codes:

- D.O.T.: 075.364-010
- G.O.E.: 10.02.01
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- H.O.C.: ISR, ISE, SIA, SIE

Occupational Subtitles:

- Community health nurses
- Occupational health nurses
- Office nurses
- Public health nurses
- School nurses
- Staff nurses

Related D.O.T. Occupations:

- Directors of nursing service
- Directors of schools of nursing
- Educational consultants
- Psychiatric aide instructors

Related G.O.E. Occupations:

- In-service coordinators
- Licensed practical nurses
- Nurse instructors
- Nurse consultants
- Nurse midwives
- Nurse practitioners
- Nurse anesthetists
- Physician assistants

Noteworthy Quote:

"Nursing is a profession that challenges a person intellectually, physically, and emotionally. But it also is a profession that is incredibly rewarding. Nurses are with people during every life crisis from birth through death. They have the privilege of being quite intimate with strangers. They are well-respected and they make a real difference in the lives of people and communities. Who could ask for more from a career?"

— **Theresa M. Valiga, Ed.D., RN,**
Director of Research and Professional Development, National League for Nursing, 61 Broadway, 33rd Floor, New York, New York

Nurses, registered professional ('nur-ses, 'reg-is-tered pro-'fes-sion-al) work to promote health, prevent disease, and help patients who are ill. They provide direct care by observing, assessing, and recording symptoms and patient progress. They work closely with doctors to treat and examine patients, administer medications, and help with healing and rehabilitation.

Registered nurses help patients by developing plans of care, teaching patients and their families how to take care of their health, providing treatments, and supporting patients who are frightened or dying. Those who work in hospitals usually work in one department such as surgery, maternity, intensive care, or pediatrics. Registered nurses who work in doctors' offices prepare patients for examination by taking height, weight, temperature and blood pressure measurements, and by giving them information instructing them in health care. Those who work in nursing homes may provide direct patient care, hold supervisory positions, and direct licensed practical nurses and licensed or unlicensed aides. They may work in a variety of other settings including community health centers, prisons, homes, the military, industry, and managed healthcare programs.



Registered Nurses examine and observe patients in a health care setting.

Photo by Deborah S. Winters

Work Performed

Nursing involves many specialties practiced in a wide range of settings. In general, all registered nurses (RNs) perform the same basic duties. They examine and observe patients in a health care setting. They assess and evaluate patients' needs, and offer their patients direct care designed to meet those needs. RNs administer medications and help patients through convalescence and rehabilitation. RNs also develop and carry out nursing care plans. They instruct patients and their families in health care, and they help individuals take steps to improve or keep their health, and serve as advocates for their patients. State laws govern the general practice of

nursing, but work settings may dictate day-to-day tasks.

Nurses work under the supervision of nursing managers and with physicians, pharmacists, physical therapists, and other health care providers. They take care of many patients, each of whom may have a different health problem and different needs. They offer bedside nursing care and carry out the medical treatment prescribed by the primary care provider. These RNs observe the patients and evaluate their responses. They take each patient's temperature, blood pressure, and pulse rate and record the data on the patient's chart.

Staff nurses observe and record the actions, symptoms, and progress of the patients. They administer medications and may perform certain medical procedures such as starting intravenous fluids, or giving injections. In some units, they monitor each patient's life signs using specialized equipment. If a patient requires emergency care, they take action and call for assistance from other members of the health care team.

Staff RNs in hospitals direct and supervise licensed practical nurses, and other personnel who assist in the care of the patients. They work with families and with other health care staff on behalf of patients. They plan and arrange for discharge and instruct patients in self-care when they get home. Staff RNs may work in, maternity, radiology, or the operating room. Staff RNs also work in emergency rooms, intensive care units, outpatient clinics, and well children's clinics.

Office nurses in the offices of physicians, dental surgeons, and other specialists prepare patients for examination, assist the physician during examination, and instruct the patients on medications. Office nurses may, on instructions from the primary care provider, administer injections, dress wounds, or remove stitches. They maintain office records of patients. They may also develop x-rays and do routine lab tests such as urinalysis and blood counts.

Community health or public health nurses visit private homes to provide nursing services and health education to patients and their families. These nurses are employed by public health departments, visiting nurse associations, and home care agencies. They instruct individuals and families and other groups in health education, disease prevention, nutrition, child care, and home care of ill persons. They also arrange for and provide immunizations, blood pressure testing, and other health screening procedures.

Public health nurses give pregnant women advice on prenatal health, show parents how to care for new babies, and advise them on childhood health and disease prevention. They give care and support to those who must adapt to a disability, an illness, or death. They may work with a family to arrange accommodations in a nursing home or rehabilitation center for a patient who needs this kind of service.

Community health nurses work with other agencies

and professionals in assessing health needs in the community and in planning to meet those needs. Their knowledge of local resources and their ties with families, teachers, town leaders, and physicians make them important links in the health care system.

Much of the work of school nurses consists of preventive medicine. They assist in immunization and safety programs, provide counseling, and teach students about good health. School nurses give physicals and perform routine vision and hearing tests. They give first aid for minor injuries and refer students to primary care providers if more treatment is necessary. They may dispense medications that children have had prescribed by a family doctor. School nurses may help students with problems such as inattention, disruptive behavior, or substance abuse. They may observe signs of illness, delayed development, or nutrition deficiency in school children and make referrals to address such problems. They observe or report any evidence of abuse or neglect. School nurses work with families, faculty, staff, and public and private clinics to establish standards and policies for school health programs. They also may be active in devising special programs for children with disabilities.

Occupational health nurses work in factories, office buildings, or other workplaces that have large numbers of employees. They treat employees who may become ill or injured at work. After giving first aid, they arrange for transport of the patients to a primary care provider or hospital for treatment. Occupational nurses work closely with personnel departments to help employees who have problems such as alcoholism, or mental instability. In working to prevent the advance of illness and the resulting absenteeism, occupational health nurses cooperate with local physicians, community health centers, and other agencies who may offer supportive services.

All registered nurses keep records electronically or on written charts. These records are important for health histories, for reference in questions of treatment, for workers' compensation, for evidence in lawsuits, and for many other purposes.

Working Conditions

Working conditions for RNs vary widely. Hospitals are generally well-lighted and comfortable. Public health nurses may travel to see patients in homes, clinics, or other places in their work. Nurses stand, walk, and lift or handle equipment or supplies weighing up to twenty-five pounds. Caring for very ill or injured people can be stressful. Nurses may care for individuals with communicable diseases such as hepatitis or AIDS. They follow strict guidelines in such situations. Standardized guidelines protect nurses from disease transmission and other risks such as radiation and exposure to chemicals and gases

used in surgery.

Hours and Earnings

Registered nurses usually work forty hours a week. They may work days, nights, weekends, and holidays because patients need care around the clock on every day of the week. Nurses employed in departments where emergencies are common may sometimes work erratic schedules. Such schedules can be stressful, but they allow for great flexibility. About one fourth of all employed registered nurses work part time.

Annual salary for registered nurses with one year of experience was around \$31,300 on the average in 2000. Those with ten years of experience earned between \$37,000 and \$51,400 a year. Registered nurses with eighteen years of experience earned an average of \$50,700 a year. Those in the highest paying jobs earned as much as \$61,300 yearly.

Many hospitals, medical centers, and companies that employ nurses offer fringe benefits such as tuition reimbursement for continuing education, health insurance, paid holidays, sick leave, and paid vacations. Some also provide a uniform allowance. Many institutions help employees improve their skills and advance through continuing education and staff development programs.

Education and Training

All entrants to nursing school must be high school graduates. Most nursing programs expect students to have completed courses in English, foreign languages, math, and science, such as biology or chemistry.

There are three kinds of preparation for registered nurses. Four-year baccalaureate degree programs are available at many colleges and universities. Two-year or three-year associate degree programs are offered at some two-year and community or junior colleges, and at some hospitals. All programs combine classroom instruction and clinical experiences in a variety of health care settings. The need for more advanced training has moved nursing education mostly into the college and university system. Many career options are open only to registered nurses who have earned their education through a bachelor's degree program.

Students in nursing programs take courses in anatomy, physiology, microbiology, chemistry, nutrition, psychology, and other behavioral sciences, as well as nursing. Students complete supervised clinical experiences in hospital departments such as pediatrics, psychiatry, maternity, and surgery, learning to care for patients with a wide range of illnesses or injuries. A growing number of programs include courses in gerontological nursing, or care of the elderly, with clinical practice in nursing homes. Many programs also offer clinical experiences in public health departments, home health agencies, and community-based settings.

In recent years, there have been movements to raise the minimum educational requirements for an RN license to

a bachelor's degree. As this occurs, however, it will be state by state through legislation. Prospective students should keep this in mind when considering which nursing program to enroll in. Although an associate degree is enough for a staff position in a hospital or a nursing home, a bachelor's degree is usually necessary for advancement to administrative positions in a hospital. Nursing specialties such as nurse practitioner, nurse anesthetist, and nurse-midwife require a graduate degree.

Licenses, Professional Societies

To become licensed to practice as a registered nurse, individuals must graduate from an approved school of nursing and pass a national examination. Periodic renewal of the license is mandatory, and some states require continuing education as a condition of renewal.

Nurses may be licensed in more than one state, either by examination or by endorsement of a license issued by another state. Most states accept the licenses of nurses from other states, provided the scores on the tests they took are acceptable to those states.

Many organizations represent nurses and offer services to them. The American Nurses Association (ANA) currently has about 200,000 members. The ANA is made up of fifty-three state and territorial associations and more than 900 district associations of nurses. Membership is limited to registered nurses. The National League for Nursing (NLN) is an organization of professional and nonprofessional individuals and agencies. The NLN has about 18,000 individual members and 1,500 agency members including hospitals, schools, and community health agencies. The National League for Nursing is the official accrediting agency for schools of nursing. Many other organizations related to nursing and health care are devoted to nursing specialties such as surgery, anesthesiology, and pediatrics.

Personal Qualifications

Registered nurses must be mature individuals with poise, self-confidence, and self-reliance. They must be observant, alert, and aware of their patients. They must be able to act swiftly and correctly in an emergency. Nurses need both physical and emotional stamina to cope with the stresses of this work. Nurses must be able to accept responsibility, and they should be able to direct or supervise others. They should be able to follow orders exactly, but they also need good judgment to determine when those orders need to be questioned or when consultation with physicians, nursing supervisors, or other health care providers is necessary.

Registered nurses must be caring and empathetic. They must have patience and compassion when dealing with patients and families who must cope with life

threatening illnesses. They must be emotionally capable of dealing with terminally ill and dying patients.

Occupations can be adapted for workers with

disabilities. Persons should contact their school or employment counselors, their state office of vocational rehabilitation, or their state department of labor to explore fully their individual needs and requirements as well as the requirements of the occupation.

Where Employed

There are approximately 2.5 million registered nurses currently licensed in the United States today. Almost two thirds of all registered nurses work in hospitals. Another third work in community health agencies such as public health departments, visiting nurse associations, and home health agencies. RNs work in nursing homes, physicians' offices, and nursing schools. Others are employed in business and industry, and in public schools. More nurses are employed in cities and urban areas than in rural areas, but any community with a hospital, nursing home, or clinic will need registered nurses to perform health care duties.

Employment Outlook

Jobs for registered nurses are expected to become available faster than the average for all occupations through the year 2008. Technological advances in patient care and increasingly complex health conditions will require the services of nursing professionals. A growing population of elderly people, AIDS, and complex medical technologies that require the skills of registered nurses all point to a continued and growing demand for registered nurses in nursing homes, home health care, ambulatory care, and traditional hospitals.

Entry Methods

Registered nurses may find employment through their school placement office. They can sign up with a nurse employment service or with a state employment office. Nurses can apply to hospitals, nursing homes, industrial plants, and government agencies that employ registered nurses. They may also get job leads from nurses' associations or from professional journals that list openings throughout the United States. Daily newspapers also post listings of available positions. The Internet provides job search services especially for registered nurses.

Advancement

Registered nurses with years of experience and further education may advance to become nursing team leaders, primary nurses, nurse managers, or supervisors in nursing departments. Some RNs with a master's degree or a doctorate become nurse practitioners, nurse anesthetists, nurse midwives, and clinical nurse specialists. Some nurses with advanced degrees move into the business arena of health care. They may become managers of

ambulatory, acute, home health, and chronic care services. Many with a master's or doctoral degree teach in schools of nursing, do research, write for publication, provide consultation, or start their own business.

As registered nurses complete continuing education programs, they earn more pay and take on more responsibility for the additional education they gain which enables them to perform more specialized tasks.

For Further Research

National League for Nursing, Publications Order Unit, 350 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014.

Scholarships and Loans for Nursing Education, 2nd Edition.
\$23.95.

VGM Career Horizons, NTC Publishing Group, 4255 West Touhy Avenue, Lincolnwood, IL 60646.

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