# **Careers: Registered Nurse**

By U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, adapted by Newsela staff

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College of DuPage Nursing student Monashay Pertee rushes to treat a mock patient at a hospital simulation lab. Photo by: COD Newsroom/Flickr.

Registered nurses (RNs) provide and coordinate patient care. They educate patients and the public about various health conditions, and provide advice and emotional support to patients and their families.

## **Duties**

Registered nurses record patients’ medical histories and symptoms and give patients medicines and treatments they need. It's their job to operate certain medical equipment and help perform tests on patients and analyze the results. The nurse will teach the patient and their families how to manage an illness or injury, and explain what to do at home after treatment.

Most registered nurses work as part of a team with doctors and other health care experts. Some registered nurses oversee licensed practical nurses, nursing assistants and home health aides.

Registered nurses’ duties and titles often depend on where they work and the patients they work with. For example, an oncology nurse may work with cancer patients or a geriatric nurse may work with elderly patients. Some registered nurses combine one or more areas of practice. For example, a pediatric oncology nurse works with children and teens who have cancer.

Nurses may care for many specific types of patients. The following list includes just a few examples:

• Addiction nurses care for patients who need help to overcome addictions to alcohol, drugs and other substances.

• Cardiovascular nurses care for patients with heart disease and people who have had heart operations.

• Critical care nurses work in intensive-care units in hospitals. They provide care to patients with serious illnesses and injuries that need very close monitoring and treatment.

• Genetics nurses provide screening, counseling and treatment for patients with genetic disorders such as cystic fibrosis.

• Neonatology nurses take care of newborn babies.

• Rehabilitation nurses care for patients with temporary or permanent disabilities.

Registered nurses may work to promote public health by educating people on warning signs and symptoms of disease or managing chronic, long-term health conditions. They may also run immunization clinics, like for flu shots or blood drives and other community outreach programs. Other nurses staff the health clinics in schools.

Some nurses do not work directly with patients, but they must still have an active registered nurse license. These people may work as nurse educators, health care consultants, hospital administrators, salespeople for medical supply companies or as medical writers and editors.

Clinical nurse specialists (CNSs) are a type of advanced practice registered nurse (APRN). They provide direct patient care in one of many nursing specialties. CNSs often leaders, and may work with other nurses and other staff to improve the quality of care that patients receive.

## **Work Environment**

Registered nurses work in many settings, from schools to doctors' offices. Registered nurses held about 2.8 million jobs in 2014. The largest employers of registered nurses were as follows:

Hospitals; state, local and private: 61 percent

Nursing and residential care facilities: 7 percent

Offices of physicians: 7 percent

Home health care services: 6 percent

Government: 6 percent

Registered nurses are the largest health care occupation. Many work in hospitals, while others work in schools or serve in the military. Some even will travel to patients' homes to provide care.

Some nurses move frequently. They travel around the United States and the world to help care for patients in places where there are not enough health care workers.

## **Injuries And Illnesses**

Registered nurses may spend a lot of time walking, bending, stretching and standing. They may get back injuries because they often must lift and move patients.

In addition, the work of registered nurses may put them in close contact with people who have contagious diseases. They frequently come in contact with potentially harmful and hazardous drugs and other substances. Therefore, registered nurses must follow strict rules to guard against diseases and create a clean environment.

## **Work Schedules**

Because patients in hospitals and nursing care facilities need round-the-clock care, nurses in these settings usually work in shifts, covering all 24 hours. They may work nights, weekends and holidays. They also may be on call, which means they have to come in immediately if a hospital or clinic needs them.

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

In 2014, about 1 out of 6 registered nurses worked part-time.

## **How To Become A Registered Nurse**

Registered nurses must be able to effectively communicate with patients to understand their concerns and assess their health conditions. Registered nurses usually take one of three education paths: a bachelor of science degree in nursing (BSN), an associate’s degree in nursing (ADN), or a diploma from an approved nursing program. Registered nurses also must be licensed.

## **Education**

In all nursing education programs, students take courses in anatomy, physiology, microbiology, chemistry, nutrition, psychology and other social and behavioral sciences, as well as in liberal arts such as math and literature. BSN programs typically take four years to complete. ADN and diploma programs usually take two to three years to complete. All programs include hands-on nursing experience with instruction from a supervisor.

Bachelor’s degree programs usually teach communication, leadership and critical thinking. These programs also offer more experience in non-hospital settings. A bachelor’s degree or higher is often necessary for management positions, research and teaching.

Generally, anyone with a bachelor’s, associate’s or diploma will qualify for entry-level positions as a staff nurse. However, employers—particularly those in hospitals—may require a bachelor’s degree.

Many registered nurses with an ADN or diploma choose to go back to school to earn a bachelor’s degree through an RN-to-BSN program. There are also master’s degree programs in nursing, combined bachelor’s and master’s programs, and accelerated programs for those who wish to enter the nursing profession and already hold a bachelor’s degree in another field. Some employers will pay for this extra schooling.

Clinical nurse specialists (CNSs) must earn a master’s degree in nursing and typicallyalready have one or more years of work experience as an RN or in a related field. CNSs who conduct research typically need a doctoral degree.

## **Licenses, Certifications And Registrations**

Throughout the U.S., registered nurses must have a nursing license. To become licensed, nurses must graduate from an approved nursing program and pass the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX-RN).

Other requirements for licensing vary by state. Each state’s board of nursing can give details. For more information on the NCLEX-RN and a list of state boards of nursing, visit theNational Council of State Boards of Nursing.

Nurses can get certified in specific areas, such as ambulance care and pediatrics, among others. Such a certification isn't always necessary.

## **Important Qualities**

Critical-thinking skills. Registered nurses must be able to assess changes in the health status of patients, including determining when to take action and when to send them to special doctors.

Communication skills. Registered nurses must be able to communicate effectively with patients in order to understand their concerns and assess their health conditions. Nurses need to explain instructions, such as how to take medication, clearly. They must be able to work in teams with other health professionals and communicate the patients’ needs.

Compassion. Registered nurses should be understanding when caring for patients.

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

Emotional stability. Registered nurses deal with pain. They need emotional strength and the ability to manage their emotions during emergencies and stressful moments.

Organizational skills. Nurses often work with multiple patients with various health needs. Organizational skills are critical to make sure that each patient is given appropriate care.

Physical stamina. Nurses should be comfortable performing physical tasks, such as moving patients. They may be on their feet for most of their shift.

## **Advancement**

Most registered nurses begin as staff nurses in hospitals or community health settings. With experience, good performance and more education, they can move to other settings or be promoted to positions with more responsibility.

In management, nurses can advance to more senior-level administrative roles, such asassistant director or director of nursing, vice president of nursing, or chief nursing officer. For many of these positions, a master's degree in nursing or health services administration is required.

Some nurses move into the business side of health care. Employers—including hospitals, insurance companies, medicine makers, among others—need registered nurses for jobs in health planning and development, marketing and quality assurance.

Some RNs choose to become nurse anesthetists, nurse midwives or nurse practitioners. These are types of advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs). APRNs may provideprimary and specialty care, and in many states they may prescribe medications.

Other nurses work as postsecondary teachers in colleges and universities.

## **Pay**

The median annual wage for registered nurses was $68,450 in May 2016. The median wage is the wage at which half the workers in an occupation earned more than that amount and half earned less. The lowest 10 percent earned less than $47,120. The highest 10 percent earned more than $102,990.

As of May 2016, here are the median annual wages for registered nurses in the topindustries in which they worked:

Government: $73,980

Hospitals; state, local and private: $70,590

Home health care services: $64,140

Offices of physicians: $61,730

Nursing and residential care facilities: $60,950

Employers may offer flexible work schedules, childcare, educational benefits and bonuses.

## **Job Outlook**

Employment of registered nurses is projected to grow 16 percent from 2014 to 2024. That's much faster than the average for all occupations. Growth will occur for a number of reasons.

Demand for health care services will increase because of the aging population. Older people typically have more medical problems than younger people. Nurses also will be needed to educate and care for patients with long-term conditions, such as arthritis, dementia,diabetes and obesity.

Also, because of new laws, more people are expected to have access to health insurance. Before, many people didn't have insurance or found it too expensive. After the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, took effect starting in 2010, it became easier for many people to get health care services. More nurses will be needed to care for these patients.

A hospital tries to get a patient cared for as quickly as possible. Hospitals try to care for patients quickly so that they can have space for other patients. However, some patients may still need more care after their hospital visit. That's where long-term care facilities and outpatient care centers come in. They provide care outside the hospital, and they will need more nurses in the future.

Job growth is expected in places that care for stroke and head injury patients and infacilities that treat people with Alzheimer’s disease. In addition, there will also be a greater need for health care at home. Many older people prefer to be treated there instead of a hospital.

At outpatient care centers, patients do not stay overnight. These places provide same-day chemotherapy, rehabilitation and surgery.

## **Job Prospects**

Overall, job opportunities for registered nurses are expected to be good. However, there have been more nurses joining the work force in recent years. This increase has resulted in competition for jobs in some areas of the country.

Generally, registered nurses with a bachelor of science degree in nursing (BSN) will have better job prospects than those without one. Employers also may prefer candidates who have some nursing work experience.

Job opportunities should be good. Many nurses will retire over the next decade, and their jobs must be replaced. There is also a growing need for nurses because there are more people getting health care.

**Writing Prompt:** What role does this career play in society and the economy? Write two paragraphs using details from the article.