



# How to Become a Nurse: The Complete Guide to Nursing Programs, Degrees, and Career Paths

# How to Become a Nurse: The Complete Guide to College Nursing Programs, Degrees, and Career Paths

---

There are several reasons you might be interested in a career in health care. For example, health care jobs offer job growth and stability. Health care roles are also available for a variety of education and experience levels. The field is fast-paced and exciting, and offers you the chance to make a difference in people's lives.

In a world of uncertainty, health care jobs are in abundance. According to the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), employment of health care occupations is projected to grow 18% from 2016 to 2026, much faster than the average for all other occupations.<sup>1</sup>

If you're just beginning to explore a career in nursing, here's what you need to know about earning a nursing degree and the career paths available to you.



# An Associate's Degree in Nursing:

## Path to Becoming a Registered Nurse

The [Associate of Science in Nursing \(ADN\)](#) is one route toward becoming a registered nurse. Earning your ADN usually takes 2 years and degrees are offered at many community colleges and career-focused schools.

### The Application Process for the ADN

Each nursing program is unique and has different admission requirements. Carefully review program guidelines before applying. Common requirements include a high school GPA of 2.5 (or GED equivalent) and a certain ACT or SAT subscore (18 for the former, 25 for the latter).

Some programs also require applicants to submit a HESI exam or TEAS test score. The [Health Education Systems, Inc. \(HESI\) Admission Assessment Exam](#) is a timed, computerized test. It is used as a baseline entrance criterion by some nursing schools. Likewise, the [Test of Essential Academic Skills \(TEAS\)](#), distributed by Assessment Technologies Institute, is a multiple choice exam that measures entry-level skills and abilities of nursing program applicants.

Additionally, some programs require applicants to pass a criminal background check and drug screening before admittance.

### ADN Classrooms, Clinicals, and Career Paths

In general, first-year nursing students take classes to learn the fundamentals of nursing. This could include

introductory courses in human anatomy and physiology, microbiology, sociology, developmental psychology, and pharmacology. Additionally, a first-year nursing student's coursework usually includes general education courses and at least one humanities elective.

While the first year is meant to create a base of nursing knowledge, the second year is meant to technically prepare and train students to become RNs. As a second-year nursing student, your coursework could include classes on psychiatric nursing, surgical nursing, and maternity and infant nursing.

Throughout your education, you'll be required to rotate through and complete a series of clinicals that grant you first-hand, real-life experience in various areas of nursing. Meant to complement what you learn in the classroom, this could include learning from and working alongside RNs in hospitals, clinics, nursing homes, and psychiatric wards. This onsite training prepares you to provide registered nursing care in numerous settings, depending on your job choice.

### Licensing

After graduation, ADN students must pass the National Council Licensure Examination-Registered Nurse ([NCLEX-RN](#)<sup>®</sup>), governed by their state's board of nursing, to become a registered nurse.<sup>2</sup> Once licensed, you can apply for and begin your first RN job.

#### As an RN, you could work in:

- Family practice
- Geriatric nursing
- Adult health nursing
- Maternal infant nursing
- Pediatric nursing
- Mental health nursing
- Medical surgical nursing

# The RN-to-BSN:

## Bachelor of Science in Nursing

A Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) may be the next step for RNs who are seeking to enhance their skills and pursue more advanced roles. Many people choose to earn their ADN first and then return for their BSN after working for a few years as a licensed RN.

An RN-to-BSN program generally takes 2 years and can be completed online or on-campus. Accelerated programs, such as Purdue University Global's [ExcelTrack™ RN-to-BSN online nursing degree](#), enable you to move quickly past what you already know so that you can focus on what you still need to learn in a personalized, competency-based educational environment.

### Career Opportunities

Even if you love working the floor as an RN, you may not want to be there your entire career. If teaching or advancing into administration interests you, a BSN can help you get there. Nurses with a BSN could also explore opportunities in:

- Community education and public health
- Nursing case management
- Nursing management and leadership
- Implementation of evidence-based practice
- Patient care coordination
- Non-hospital employment opportunities
- Health care administration

### The Benefits of Earning a BSN

A BSN can help nurses grow their job opportunities and offers appreciable knowledge and skills.<sup>3</sup> Research shows that nurses with a BSN or higher-level degree have

stronger communication and problem-solving skills and are more likely to make an accurate diagnosis based on evaluation. According to data collected by the [American Association of the Colleges of Nursing](#), nurses with a BSN are more likely to have lower patient mortality rates and lower failure-to-rescue rates.

### The Outside Motivation for BSN-Prepared Nurses

Many government, nonprofit, and other professional organizations are advocating for an increase in the number of BSN-prepared nurses across clinical settings. For example:

- Magnet hospitals are recognized by the [American Nurses Credentialing Center](#) as entities that meet high quality standards of nursing excellence. To achieve and keep Magnet status, hospitals must employ only those who meet certain educational eligibility criteria. For example, all nurse managers and nurse leaders at Magnet hospitals must hold a BSN or graduate degree in nursing.
- In 2008, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Institute of Medicine launched a two-year initiative to assess and transform the nursing profession. In its 2011 [report](#), "The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health," the committee recommended that the number of the nation's nurses with baccalaureate degrees be increased to 80% by 2020.
- Some states, including [New York](#) and [New Jersey](#), have proposed "BSN-in-10" mandates that would require RNs to earn their BSN within 10 years of graduation from an entry-level RN program.
- The U.S. Army, U.S. Navy, and U.S. Air Force all require active duty nurses to hold at least a baccalaureate degree in nursing.
- To be hired by the [Veteran's Administration](#), the nation's largest employer of registered nurses, applicants must hold a BSN or graduate degree in nursing.

In addition, large hospitals and medical centers are increasingly requiring their RNs to have a bachelor's

degree to apply for employment, according to Dr. Connie Zak, associate dean for [online nursing programs at Purdue Global](#). “Associate’s degree nurses can get jobs very easily in rural areas,” Dr. Zak says, “but in the major metropolitan areas, they will often only hire BSN-prepared nurses.”

A BSN also enables students to move on to a [Master of Science in Nursing \(MSN\) degree](#), which is required for advanced nursing roles such as nurse practitioners.

# Master’s Degree in Nursing:

## Preparing to Be a Nurse Educator or Manager, and for Advanced Practice Roles

Building on a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree in nursing enables students to develop expertise in a specialized area. This can be for nurses who, after a few years of experience, have identified career goals that match their skills and interest, but some nurses do pursue an MSN from the outset of their education. Nurses who pursue an MSN will often focus on one of these advanced practice areas:<sup>4</sup>

- **Nurse practitioner (NP):** Diagnose and treat common illnesses and injuries, administer immunizations, order X-rays, offer primary care, etc.

- **Certified nurse anesthetist (CRNA):** Administer anesthesia in operating rooms, dental offices, outpatient surgical centers, etc.
- **Certified nurse midwife (CNM):** Provide pre- and postnatal care, deliver babies, and offer general gynecological services.
- **Certified nurse specialist (CNS):** Provide specialty care in a range of areas from pediatric to psychiatric nursing.
- **Nurse executive:** Blend business skills with health care expertise; manage a team of nurses while also handling a budget, managing overall finances, etc.
- **Nurse educator:** In classroom and clinical settings, nurse educators lead lectures, develop nursing school curriculums, and teach aspiring nurses how to provide patient care.

## MSN Program Requirements and Curriculum

Each MSN program will differ, but most require students to be a licensed registered nurse, have a BSN degree, reach a minimum GPA and/or GRE score, and have a certain amount of clinical experience. Full-time programs generally take 18 to 24 months.

Master’s-level education could include courses in health care theory, ethics and policy, human resources, information technology, specialized practice, research management, and advanced practice nursing.

As with undergraduate degrees, much of your coursework will be split between classroom and clinical settings. Online programs, such as Purdue Global’s [master’s degree in nursing](#) and [accelerated master’s degree in nursing](#), are also available.

# Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP):

## The Door to Clinical and Leadership Positions

There are two types of doctoral nursing programs: research-focused programs and practice-focused programs. While the former has a heavy focus on scientific content and research methodology, the latter emphasizes evidence-based application. Both are designed to produce clinical experts who will be leaders in their areas of expertise.

In many DNP programs, candidates engage in practice experiences with the help of a faculty mentor. For example, while taking a course in DNP leadership, this could include working alongside a chief financial officer to understand their role in managing workplace finances.

Additionally, some programs require an original, practice-focused research project, which could include defending a dissertation. In these cases, you may earn capstone hours when you complete practice experiences that relate to your specialization.

With a DNP, you'll be better equipped to bridge the theory-practice gap—an ongoing issue of matching textbook learning with clinical competency. Ultimately, the purpose of a DNP program is to teach nurses how to translate their research into practice, with the end goal of improving patient outcomes.

### College Credits

Graduation requirements vary per specialized program and can depend on the amount of practice hours you have completed when you enroll. Full-time [MSN-to-DNP](#) programs typically take 1 to 2 years to complete and are available in both online and on-campus settings. Because DNP candidates generally work and study simultaneously,

many earn an [online DNP degree](#) for maximum flexibility. In some cases, independent study options are available for those who need additional coursework to achieve program minimums.

### Career Outcomes

With a DNP degree, nurses can expect to advance in leadership roles as nurse practitioners, nurse executives, expert clinicians, and nursing instructors. Due to an aging population and an increased focus on preventative care, these professions—which include those working as nurse anesthetists and nurse midwives—are projected to grow 31% from 2016 to 2026, according to the [BLS](#).

### A Pioneer in the Profession

The DNP is fairly new with relatively few graduates in the workforce. In fact, fewer than 30,000 of the nation's more than 3 million nurses have doctoral degrees in nursing, according to a 2013 report from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the country's largest philanthropy institution devoted to health. Initiatives such as the [Future of Nursing: Campaign for Action](#) are striving to change that, with a goal to double the number of nurses with a doctorate degree by 2020.

Earning the degree can not only set you apart as an expert in your field, but it makes you a pioneer in the nursing profession. DNP-prepared nurses have the potential to revolutionize the current health care system and contribute in a positive way to the evolution of their occupation.

Earning the degree can not only set you apart as an expert in your field, but it makes you a pioneer in the nursing profession.

# Ready to Launch a Career in Nursing?

Nurses are critical thinkers. They're hard workers. They're patient advocates. They see people in their most vulnerable moments and experience the human condition at its worst—and at its best.

If you're interested in joining the ranks and becoming a nurse, the [Purdue Global School of Nursing](#) encourages you to talk to people in the profession to learn more. Discuss the program requirements with an advisor at your local community college or a university of your choice. Residents of Iowa and Nebraska may inquire about earning an [associate's degree in nursing at Purdue Global](#).



## HOW WILL YOU MAKE A DIFFERENCE AS A NURSE?

### Important Information: Please Read

- 1 National long-term projections may not reflect local and/or short-term economic or job conditions, and do not guarantee actual job growth.
- 2 Graduates must meet state licensing and certification requirements and pass the NCLEX-RN exam to become a registered nurse or the NCLEX-PN to become a licensed practical nurse. NCLEX is a registered trademark of the National Council of State Boards of Nursing, Inc.
- 3 Purdue Global cannot guarantee employment or career advancement.
- 4 Purdue Global's programs do not align to all the specialties listed. You should research the education requirements of any specialty of interest.