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PREPARING FOR THE NCLEX AND YOUR LICENSE

ELEMENTS OF PREPARING FOR THE NCLEX AND YOUR LICENSE

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In this chapter we discuss your preparation for the National Council Licensure Exam (NCLEX), the roles and function of the state boards of nursing, the state practice act, and your licensure and scope of nursing practice. You may be experiencing some anxiety about taking a lengthy exam, and you may even wonder whether you are adequately prepared for the exam and prepared to practice as a registered professional nurse.

Stop. Take a deep breath, and consider all your preparation efforts over the past several years while in a nursing program. You know far more than you think you do about preparing for this exam, and we want to give you some helpful information about the NCLEX.

We will discuss the many resources available to help you review for the NCLEX. We recommend that you do everything possible to be well prepared before scheduling your time to take the NCLEX.

Also, until now you may have had no idea what a state board of nursing does or how the board is directly related to the NCLEX or how the state board supports nurses. This chapter will also explain state nurse practice acts and help to define the license and scope of practice for the registered nurse (RN).

You are about to take (arguably) the most important exam of your life. Passing this exam allows for your licensure application, so you should understand all areas of the exam.

Preparing for the NCLEX

The NCLEX is the licensing exam for nurses in the United States and Canada (NCSBNA, 2014). There are two types of exams:

- NCLEX-RN, to become a registered nurse, or RN
- NCLEX-PN, to become a licensed practical nurse, or LPN (NCSBNa, 2014)

Students who earn a nursing degree from, and successfully graduate from, an associate degree program (2-year), a diploma program (3-year), or a baccalaureate program (4-year) will take the NCLEX-RN. To ensure public safety, each state board of nursing requires that anyone wanting to practice nursing must successfully pass the NCLEX-RN, which tests minimum competency for an entry-level nurse (NCSBN, 2014a). You must pass this licensure exam before applying for licensure in the state in which you want to practice.

Who Owns the NCLEX?


The National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) is a professional organization that consists of all 50 states' boards of nursing. It is the NCSBN that developed and owns the NCLEX (NCSBN, 2014a).

Before you take the NCLEX-RN test, visit the many resources located on the NCSBN website, including the frequently asked questions (FAQ) sheet (NCSBN, 2014b). Resources include an application for the exam, registration, and the overall test plan. Reading, reviewing, and familiarizing yourself with these resources is a vital part of the preparation.

Whether you are a new graduate or you have recently moved to a state that requires licensure applicants to take the NCLEX-RN, preparation for the examination is *essential*—we cannot stress it enough. Every nurse must successfully pass the NCLEX in order to be licensed. This exam can provoke anxiety. Understanding the

examination process can help you lower the anxiety you feel on exam day.

The NCLEX-RN is a *computer adaptive test (CAT)*, in which each candidate exam is created as each question is answered. If the candidate answers the question correctly, the test bank is queried for a more difficult question to answer. If the candidate incorrectly answers the question, an easier question is offered.



For a detailed explanation of how the CAT exam works, visit the NCSBN website at www.ncsbn.org.

These are the key characteristics of the NCLEX-RN:

- Because of the individuality of the CAT, no two candidates will receive the same NCLEX-RN.
- You must answer the question that is presented; skipping questions is not permitted.
- There is no penalty for guessing on questions that you might find unfamiliar.
- All candidates will have to answer at least 75 questions, which is the minimum number of questions.
- Of the 75 questions, 60 questions will be from the NCLEX-RN test bank. The other 15 are *pretest* questions: The NCSBN is testing them for future exams. These pretest questions do not count in your overall NCLEX score.

What Content Is on the NCLEX?

Content knowledge was introduced, covered, and reinforced during your educational experience. Schools of nursing curriculum are designed to properly cover the various patient needs and

how to prepare for medication administration, interventions, and medical treatment. For example, you likely were required to take a course in foundational nursing, which included both didactic and clinical requirements. Foundational nursing will likely be covered on the NCLEX-RN as a client need of *Physiological Integrity: Basic Care and Comfort*.

The NCLEX-RN test plan outlines the four client needs that are covered on the examination itself (NCSBN, 2012):

- Health promotion and maintenance
- Psychosocial integrity
- Safe and effective care environment
- Physiological integrity (NCLEX-RN Test Plan, 2012)

Two of the four categories (safe and effective care environment and physiological integrity) contain subcategories including management of care, safety and infection control, basic care and comfort, pharmacological and parenteral therapies, reduction of risk therapies, and physiological adaptation (NCLEX-RN Test Plan, 2012).

The NCLEX-RN Test Plan (2012) provides important information regarding content distribution within the examination itself. For example, the NCLEX-RN Test Plan indicates the questions related to safe and effective care environment (management of care) will be between 17% and 23% of the overall test.

Using a Review Manual

In addition to identifying the client areas covered by the exam itself, test takers can read an NCLEX-RN review manual. These manuals, published by various companies, review major content areas for

nursing, including fundamentals, maternity, pediatric, adult medical-surgical, critical care, and mental health.

These review manuals typically offer content chapter assessments (i.e., sample test questions). Reviewing sample test questions can help you identify areas of strength and weakness related to the various content areas. For example, if maternity is an area of strength for you, you may choose instead to focus on an area where you have less knowledge.

Taking a Review Course

You also may choose to prepare for the examination by attending an *organized review* course, which is offered online or onsite. If the review course is onsite, it typically lasts a few days. This type of course offers an evaluation of your strengths and weaknesses in each of the core content areas. In addition, an organized review course typically offers test-taking suggestions, including how to identify the stem of the NCLEX question. This identification allows you to focus on what the question is asking, therefore easily eliminating distractors in the available answer options. (See the sample NCLEX question in the nearby sidebar.)

Preparing Physically for the Exam

Following similar test-preparation strategies as you did for your college exams will also benefit you in preparing for the NCLEX. Establishing healthy eating and wellness habits can go a long way toward exam success, as described in these examples:

- To help decrease the chance of pre-exam illness, eat a healthy diet while varying meals.

- Incorporate regular exercise into your routine to lower your stress level as the exam draws nearer.
- Get plenty of rest, including the age-recommended amount of sleep, to eliminate tiredness during the exam itself and allow you to focus.

SAMPLE NCLEX QUESTION

The nurse discovers he made a medication error for one of his patients today. No one else witnessed the error or knows about it. To follow ethical standards, the nurse should:

(Select all that apply)

1. Do nothing.
2. Write and submit an incident report on himself.
3. Notify the patient's physician of the error.
4. Notify the patient's family of the error.

Answers: 2 and 3

Rationale:

#1: This answer is incorrect because nurses must self-report all incidents regardless of whether other people witnessed them. Self-reporting is also a part of following proper ethical standards.

#2: Nurses must work within an ethical framework. Even though no one witnessed the nurse make the error, the error still occurred. The incident report will help the risk management committee determine why and how the error was made and how to prevent it from happening again.

#3: The physician must be notified of the medication error to determine whether the medication should be given late or whether to make further changes in the medication schedule.

#4: This answer is incorrect because it is not necessary to notify the patient's family. However, the patient would need to be informed after the physician has determined whether changes will be made to the medication schedule.

Sleep is an important part of living a healthy and productive lifestyle. Sleeping is the brain's way to digest and retain the materials you have learned. Carey (2014) discussed how the first half of the night's sleep is the retention period, and the second half is the motor memory consolidation period. Therefore, missing sleep is like missing this time for your brain to process information. Harris Health System (2015) mentioned that being well rested can improve memory recall and the ability to maintain concentration. Getting a good night of sleep can help you remember information more easily.

Similarly, rapid eye movement, known as *REM sleep*, helps with deciphering hidden patterns, comprehending, and seeing solutions to difficult problems (Carey, 2014). Getting sufficient rest can be helpful for learning and retaining information you have studied. Harris Health System (2015) suggests that individuals in their early twenties should, ideally, sleep 8 or 9 hours every night. Students typically do not get sufficient hours of sleep, and it can affect their concentration, learning, and academic performance (Harris Health System, 2015). Pairing a good night of sleep with effective study habits can increase the likelihood of performing well on the exam.

Cramming for the NCLEX?

A common misconception about studying is that *cramming* (studying intensively) the night before a test is effective. In reality, losing sleep by cramming for a test is found to be less effective than spreading out study time and getting enough sleep (Prometric, 2014). Because the NCLEX tests a wide range of course content, cramming is not recommended. In fact, you have been learning the course content throughout your entire nursing curriculum. Therefore, attempting to “learn” the material days before the exam is counterproductive. Rather, you should study for a set amount of time (perhaps an hour) every day over the course of a few weeks

before the exam. This strategy gives your brain the opportunity to truly learn and retain the information.

Where Should I Study and Prepare?

Consistently using the same study environment that is conducive to focusing is essential in test preparation. Dorm rooms, living rooms, or coffee shops can be suitable for some people but are often filled with distractors. TV, roommates, background noises, and even one's own children can all be distracting when trying to focus on studying.

Finding a quiet place to study and eliminating distractions is the key to creating a more effective study environment (Grohol, 2006).

Simulating the test-taking environment may assist with your preparation for the NCLEX. Therefore, removing distractors such as Facebook, Twitter, and Netflix can be helpful. To eliminate the temptation of doing something else, bring only those items that are necessary for studying.

Frequent Breaks From Studying Are Good

Because studying requires a great deal of focus, be sure to take breaks and reward yourself (Grohol, 2006). Taking breaks while studying is a good habit to create. Setting rewards such as letting yourself watch an episode of your favorite show after finishing a chapter can help motivate you to study. Breaks and rewards can also keep you from becoming overwhelmed or worn out.

Prometric (2014) suggests studying using a variety of different techniques, such as reading books, completing practice tests, and watching instructional videos. Using a variety of study techniques allows for different types of learning and can also prevent you from becoming bored while studying.

In addition to practicing typical studying habits, you should study with the right mind-set. Trying to study with a negative mind-set can make it quite difficult to determine which information is important. Grohol (2006) suggests trying to think positively about your skills and abilities while studying.

Grohol also recommends avoiding catastrophic thinking, such as, “I will never have enough time to study,” and absolute thinking, such as, “I always screw things up for myself.” Grohol (2006) suggests that, rather than think these kinds of thoughts, you recognize that perhaps you did not have much time or did not do as well as you wanted, but that if you focus and study, you can still do your best. Catastrophic thinking, again, is merely distracting you from truly studying. Overall, having the right mind-set, environment, and study techniques can result in effective standardized test preparation.



Finding the Exam Site

The last thing you want to do is miss your exam time. Therefore, eliminate all possible causes of missing the exam time:

- Before you do anything else, print the directions to the exam site. Do not count on mapping apps on your phone to get you to the exam site. If your phone battery dies, you will not have directions easily on hand.
- Days before the exam, physically make a test run to the exam site. Take note of how long it takes you to arrive at the exam site.
- Plan to go early. Gas up your vehicle the night before, therefore eliminating the need to make unnecessary stops on the day of the test.

Being Prepared on Exam Day

Along with preparation strategies leading up to the day of your standardized test are helpful tips for being prepared when exam day arrives.

First, eat a healthy breakfast. Many individuals seem to skip this meal; however, you should eat a suitable meal in the morning (Pro-metric, 2014). Scholastic (2015) explained that skipping breakfast to sleep can make you more tired than if you had woken up and eaten breakfast. This meal can provide you with energy to focus and recall information for the test. Fruit, oatmeal, wheat toast, yogurt, and eggs are all healthy options for a good breakfast on test day (Scholastic, 2015).

Snacks can also be important during standardized tests. Some tests allow for breaks during which you can use the restroom or

grab a quick snack. Peanut butter with apple slices, cheese cubes, fruit, raw vegetables, and nuts are all examples of healthy snacks for keeping up your energy and focus during a standardized test (Scholastic, 2015).

Before taking the test, use the restroom and organize your supplies to ensure that you have everything you need before getting started (Prometric, 2014). Doing so can alleviate the stress of realizing that you are missing a needed supply halfway through the exam.

During the exam, go back and review your responses. Prometric (2014) mentioned that although people often say to “trust your gut,” you should review your answers to make sure that you have made the correct choices.

Also, when you are working through the test, skip questions that you feel stressed about and return to them later. This way, you can prevent your stress level from affecting other questions to which you know the answers. As you review your test to double-check your answers, you can also respond to those that you did not answer originally. Take deep breaths and remain focused in order to reduce your stress level (Prometric, 2014).

REGISTERING FOR THE NCLEX EXAM

Registering for the exam is an important part of the NCLEX process. Detailed information on registration is on the NCSBN website at www.ncsbn.org. The costs associated with the exam are also highlighted.

What to Do if You Fail the NCLEX Exam

Candidates who do not pass the examination will be provided with results on how they performed in each of the content areas. The results come in the form of a document known as the *NCLEX*

Candidate Performance Results (CPR). Candidates are encouraged to use the CPR when studying for their next retake (NCSBN, 2014a).

Candidates who want to retake the examination will need to contact their individual boards of nursing. The individual state boards of nursing (BON) may have specific statutes, or regulations, that limit the number of times a candidate may attempt the exam.

In addition, candidates retaking the exam must wait between 45 and 90 days until taking the next exam. After gaining BON clearance, the candidate will need to reregister for the examination with the test administrator and pay the fee. In addition, the candidate will receive a new Authorized To Test (ATT). After you receive the new ATT, you can schedule your exam.

EXPERIENCE FROM THE FIELD

Those of us who work as school of nursing faculty strive to prepare students to take the NCLEX. That preparation goes beyond the obvious nursing content and clinical skills. We review test-taking skills with our students. And we drive home the importance of adequate rest, refining study skills, and establishing a study routine. I can't tell you the number of times I've had candidates (former students) report back after taking the NCLEX that they wished they had followed my instructions because I was exactly right and on target with my test preparation tips and hints. Two of the best preparation tips we encourage: Take hundreds or thousands of NCLEX practice test questions, and attend a formal NCLEX test review.

—Constance E. McIntosh, EdD, MBA, RN

Understanding State Boards of Nursing, Your License, and Scope of Practice

Nursing licensure is regulated by the state board of nursing (BON). The BON is a member of the larger National Council of

State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN, 2014a). Although driven by different state policies, BONs share a common mission of public safety and protection while advocating for the public by effectively regulating the practice of nursing.

BONs are responsible for licensure of the nurses within each state. Applicants for licensure may come from new nursing graduates needing to successfully pass the NCLEX-RN or from RNs who are transferring from one state to another. A nurse must have a valid state license in order to practice in an individual state.

The *nurse practice act* is a state's dynamic document that addresses the responsibilities of RNs and their scope of practice. The ANA describes the scope of practice as the “who, what, where, when, why, and how” of nursing practice (ANA, 2012). Every state has a nurse practice act, which is enacted by each state's legislature. Because nursing encompasses a large set of clinical and professional skills, it would be impossible for any nurse practice act to address every professional situation that may occur within the course of a career (Russell, 2012). Therefore, it is up to the individual's state BON to interpret the nurse practice act while developing rules and regulations that will help the RN when making decisions in care delivery.

The BON authority is not limited to licensure issues and nurse practice act oversight. The BON is also responsible for the education standards for schools of nursing. Schools of nursing must receive initial and ongoing accreditation from the BON. When compliance of these education standards is not met or maintained, accreditation can be pulled, leading to the closing of schools.

As an RN, you are encouraged to know your state's nurse practice act. The NCSBN has developed a helpful resource — the nurse

practice act toolkit. The toolkit offers an increased understanding of each state's regulations and is a guide to how to locate each state's act.



The toolkit is available at the NCSBN website at <https://www.ncsbn.org/npa-toolkit.htm>

Every nurse should understand what role the state board of nursing plays in relation to his or her own license. Every state has a nurse practice act, and the nurse will be required to practice within the guidelines of the individual state's act. Before applying for licensure in any state, take the time to review the application for licensure, the guidelines, the state's practice act, and any requirements, such as continuing education units, needed for unencumbered licensure.

Chapter Checkup

Key points from this chapter include:

- The NCLEX is a licensing exam for nursing program graduates in the United States and Canada.
- The NCLEX indicates the minimal competency of the new registered nurse.
- Register for the NCLEX in the state where you plan to practice nursing.
- Every state in the United States has a nurse practice act.
- Review online or visit your individual state board of nursing so that you understand what role the board plays for registered nurses.
- A registered nurse license must be renewed according to individual state board of nursing rules.

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