

# From Bedside to Board: Understanding Nursing Career Pathways

**Bloom's Level:** Understand

**Standard:**

HOSA.CTE.1.1 — Understand Healthcare Career Pathways

NCSS.IV.1 — Personal Development and Identity

TEKS §130.202(c)(1)(A) — Employment Opportunities in Health Science

STUDENT EDITION



Nurses are often the first and most consistent point of contact in healthcare, providing comfort and care during some of a patient's most difficult moments.

## From Bedside to Board: Understanding Nursing Career Pathways

### Why Nursing Matters — and Why It Matters to You

Imagine walking into a hospital after an injury. Before you ever see a doctor, a nurse is already at your side — checking your vitals, asking about your symptoms, and making sure you feel safe. Nurses are often the first and most consistent point of contact in healthcare. They are the backbone of the entire system.

Every May 12th, the world celebrates **International Nurses Day**, marking the birthday of Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing. It's a moment to recognize not just the people already in the profession, but the next generation — students like you — who might be considering it. And here's something worth knowing: nursing is one of the **largest, fastest-growing, and most economically stable career fields** in the United States. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that registered nursing jobs will grow by 6% through 2032, adding hundreds of thousands of positions nationwide.

International Nurses Day is more than a date on a calendar — it's a global acknowledgment of the courage, compassion, and skill that nurses bring to their work every single day. Nurses serve in hospitals, schools, disaster zones, rural clinics, and community health centers. They comfort patients during frightening moments, advocate for people who can't speak for themselves, and make life-or-death decisions with calm and precision. Choosing nursing means choosing a career where your work genuinely matters — where you leave every shift knowing you made a difference in someone's life. Few careers can make that claim as consistently as nursing can.



Nurses are often the first and most consistent point of contact in healthcare, providing comfort and care during some of a patient's most difficult moments.

But "nursing" isn't a single job. It's a career ladder with multiple entry points, different levels of education, and very different salaries and responsibilities at each step. Understanding that ladder is the first step toward making a smart decision about your own future.

## The Nursing Career Ladder: Step by Step

### Step 1 – Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA)

The CNA is the entry point into hands-on patient care. Training typically takes **4 to 12 weeks** and can often be completed while still in high school through CTE programs. CNAs assist patients with daily activities like bathing, dressing, and eating. They also monitor and report changes in patient condition to nurses.

**Average wage:** \$18-\$22/hour nationally

**Work environment:** Nursing homes, hospitals, assisted living facilities

**Why it matters:** CNAs develop real clinical skills and patient communication experience that form the foundation for every higher-level role.

One important note: like all nursing credentials, CNA certification requires renewal and ongoing training to stay current. Continuing education is a consistent expectation at every level of the nursing career ladder.

### Step 2 – Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN)

LPNs complete approximately **one year of post-secondary education** and pass the NCLEX-PN licensing exam. They can administer medications, perform basic procedures, and provide more complex care than CNAs — though they still work under the supervision of RNs and physicians.

**Average wage:** \$25-\$30/hour

**Work environment:** Long-term care, clinics, home health

**Key distinction:** LPNs have a broader scope of practice than CNAs but are more limited than RNs in what they can independently assess and decide.

### Step 3 — Registered Nurse, Associate Degree (RN-ADN)

An Associate Degree in Nursing takes approximately **two years** at a community college. After passing the NCLEX-RN exam, graduates become full Registered Nurses. RNs can independently assess patients, create care plans, administer medications, and coordinate with the full healthcare team.

**Average wage:** \$35-\$45/hour

**Work environment:** Hospitals, emergency rooms, surgical centers

**Growth projection:** RN positions are among the most in-demand jobs in the country.

### Step 4 — Registered Nurse, Bachelor's Degree (RN-BSN)

A Bachelor of Science in Nursing takes **four years** and opens doors to leadership roles, specialized units, and higher-paying hospital systems. Many hospitals now prefer or require BSN-prepared nurses. The curriculum includes public health, research, and management — skills that go beyond bedside care.

**Average wage:** \$40-\$55/hour

**Career advantage:** BSN nurses are more competitive for charge nurse, case manager, and travel nurse positions.

### Step 5 — Advanced Practice Roles (NP, CRNA, CNM)

Graduate-level nursing represents the top of the clinical ladder. Nurse Practitioners (NPs) can diagnose conditions and prescribe medications. Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists (CRNAs) administer anesthesia and are among the highest-paid nurses in the country, often earning **\$150,000-\$200,000+ annually**. These roles require a master's or doctoral degree and several years of RN experience.

It's worth noting that wages at every level can vary significantly depending on your region, employer, and specialty. Urban areas and high-demand specialties often pay more, while the cost of education programs also differs by location. Researching both factors together gives you a more complete financial picture.

## Building Your Personal Decision Matrix

Understanding the ladder is useful. Applying it to your own life is the goal. Here are three questions to help you classify where you might fit:

1. **How quickly do I want to enter the workforce?** If you need income soon, the CNA or LPN pathway gets you working within a year or less.
2. **What level of patient responsibility interests me?** Some people thrive in direct, hands-on care. Others prefer coordinating, leading, or diagnosing.
3. **What are my long-term financial goals?** Each step up the ladder represents a significant increase in earning potential over a lifetime.

There is no wrong answer — only the answer that fits your situation, values, and goals.

### Summary: The Pathway Is Yours to Choose

Nursing is not one career — it's a system of careers, each with its own training timeline, scope of practice, and earning potential. From a CNA certificate earned in weeks to a CRNA doctorate earned over a decade, every step on this ladder serves a critical role in patient care and the health of communities. And at every level, nurses are expected to keep learning — through license renewals, continuing education, and ongoing professional development.

On International Nurses Day, we recognize that the nurses of tomorrow are sitting in classrooms right now. Whether you see yourself taking vitals as a CNA or administering anesthesia as a CRNA, the pathway exists — and it starts with understanding where each step leads.

The question isn't whether nursing is a good career. The data says it clearly is. The question is: **which step on the ladder is right for you?**

## Lesson Objective

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to explain the different levels of the nursing career ladder, including the education requirements, responsibilities, and earning potential at each step. You will also be able to describe how personal goals and values can guide your decision about which healthcare pathway fits you best.

**Standard:** HOSA.CTE.1.1 — Understand Healthcare Career Pathways; TEKS §130.202(c)(1)(A) — Employment Opportunities in Health Science

**Bloom's Level:** Understand

**Bloom's Goal:** Students will demonstrate understanding by explaining the key differences between nursing career pathways and connecting those differences to their own personal and professional goals.

**Explanation:** At the Understand level, learners move beyond simple recall to interpret and explain concepts in their own words. This lesson asks students to make sense of how nursing roles differ from one another and why those differences matter when planning a career.



Every May 12th, International Nurses Day honors the dedication and compassion that nurses bring to their communities around the world.

## Application Questions

Read each question carefully, think about what you learned in the article, and write a complete response in your own words.

1. Explain why the nursing career ladder has multiple entry points rather than a single starting place. What does this mean for someone who needs to start working quickly versus someone who can invest more time in education?

Think about: Consider the different education timelines for each role — CNA, LPN, RN-ADN, and RN-BSN — and how each one leads to different responsibilities and pay.

2. In your own words, describe the difference between what a CNA, an LPN, and a Registered Nurse are each allowed to do on the job. Why does scope of practice increase as you move up the ladder?

Think about: Think about how more education and training prepares nurses to take on greater responsibility for patient assessment, decision-making, and care.

3. The article says that continuing education is a consistent expectation at every level of the nursing career ladder. Why do you think healthcare employers and licensing boards require nurses to keep learning even after they are already certified or licensed?

Think about: Consider what could happen to patients if nurses stopped updating their knowledge and skills after completing their initial training.

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## Close Reading Passage

Read the passage carefully. Then answer the five questions that follow. Use evidence from the text to support your responses.

### From Bedside to Board: Understanding Nursing Career Pathways

Nursing is not one career — it's a system of careers, each with its own training timeline, scope of practice, and earning potential. The nursing career ladder begins with the Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), whose training takes as little as four to twelve weeks and can often be completed while still in high school. From there, Licensed Practical Nurses complete approximately one year of post-secondary education, while Registered Nurses earn either a two-year associate degree or a four-year bachelor's degree. At the top of the clinical ladder, Advanced Practice Nurses — including Nurse Practitioners and Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists — hold graduate degrees and can diagnose conditions, prescribe medications, or administer anesthesia. At every level, nurses are expected to keep learning through license renewals, continuing education, and ongoing professional development. The question is not whether nursing is a good career — the data says it clearly is. The question is: which step on the ladder is right for you?

1. According to the passage, what is the minimum amount of time required to begin working as a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA)? **[Comprehension]**

2. What are two examples of Advanced Practice Nursing roles mentioned in the passage, and what distinguishes them from lower-level nursing roles? [Comprehension]

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3. Based on the passage, why might a student who needs income quickly choose the CNA pathway over the Registered Nurse pathway, even if both are appealing options? [Inference]

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4. The passage states that nurses at every level are expected to keep learning through continuing education. What does this suggest about the nature of a nursing career over time? [Inference]

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5. The author ends the passage with a direct question to the reader: "which step on the ladder is right for you?" Why might the author have chosen to end with a question rather than a statement, and what effect does this have on the reader? [Craft]

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## Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences using information from the lesson article. Be specific and use vocabulary from the reading.

1. Describe two differences between a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) and a Registered Nurse (RN) in terms of education and scope of practice.

2. Explain why a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) role is considered an important foundation for higher-level nursing careers.

3. According to the article, what are three questions a student should ask themselves when deciding which nursing pathway is the right fit for them?

## Primary Source Analysis (DBQ)

Read the primary source excerpt below carefully. Then answer the four analysis questions that follow. For each question, use evidence from the source and your knowledge of healthcare career pathways to support your response.

### A Letter from a Student Nurse to Her Family [Letter]

Dear Mother and Father, I write to you from the nurses' training ward where I have now completed my third week of instruction. The matron tells us that our work here is only the beginning — that a nurse who stops learning is a nurse who stops serving. We rise before dawn to assist the senior nurses with morning rounds, checking temperatures and recording observations in the ward log. I confess the hours are long and the duties sometimes difficult, but I feel a purpose here I have not felt elsewhere. Several of my fellow students speak of continuing their studies after certification, hoping one day to supervise wards of their own or to specialize in surgical care. I do not yet know which path I shall choose, but I am grateful that paths exist. Your loving daughter, Clara

Clara Whitmore, student nurse, letter to her parents, circa 1918, adapted for educational use

1. Who wrote this letter, and what is her perspective on nursing as a career? How might her position as a student nurse shape what she chooses to include or leave out of this account? [Sourcing]

2. This letter was written around 1918. What was happening in the world at that time that might explain why nursing training programs were expanding and why young women like Clara were entering the profession in greater numbers? **[Context]**

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3. Clara writes that 'a nurse who stops learning is a nurse who stops serving.' How does this idea connect to what the lesson article says about continuing education and license renewal at every level of the nursing career ladder? **[Close Reading]**

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4. Clara mentions that some of her fellow students hope to specialize or move into supervisory roles after certification. How does this reflect the nursing career ladder described in the lesson article, and what does it suggest about the importance of understanding career pathways from the very beginning of training? **[Corroboration]**

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## Timeline Construction

Place the five nursing career pathway milestones below in the correct chronological order from earliest entry point to highest level of advanced practice. Assign each event a position on the timeline (1 = first/earliest, 5 = last/most advanced). Then, for each event, respond to the significance prompt in 1-2 sentences.

A. A student completes a 4-12 week CNA training program, often through a high school CTE course, and begins providing hands-on patient care in a nursing home or hospital.

**Date / Period:**

**Significance:**

Why is the CNA credential considered the foundation of the entire nursing career ladder?

**B.** A nurse earns a graduate-level degree and becomes a Nurse Practitioner (NP) or Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist (CRNA), gaining the authority to diagnose conditions, prescribe medications, or administer anesthesia.

**Date / Period:**

**Significance:**

Why do Advanced Practice roles represent the top of the clinical nursing ladder, and what does reaching this level require beyond education?

**C.** A nursing student completes a four-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program, gaining coursework in public health, research, and management in addition to clinical skills.

**Date / Period:**

**Significance:**

Why do many hospitals now prefer or require BSN-prepared nurses over those with only an associate degree?

**D.** A student completes approximately one year of post-secondary education and passes the NCLEX-PN exam to become a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN), gaining the ability to administer medications and perform basic procedures.

**Date / Period:**

**Significance:**

How does the LPN role expand a healthcare worker's scope of practice compared to a CNA, and what are its limitations compared to an RN?

**E.** A nursing student completes a two-year Associate Degree in Nursing (ADN) at a community college, passes the NCLEX-RN exam, and becomes a full Registered Nurse able to independently assess patients and create care plans.

**Date / Period:**

**Significance:**

Why is earning the RN-ADN credential considered a major turning point in a nursing career, and what new responsibilities does it unlock?

## Economic Decision Tree

Read the scenario below carefully. Then review the two options, including their costs and benefits. Finally, answer the three analysis questions using evidence from the scenario and what you have learned about nursing career pathways.

**Scenario:** Maria is a high school junior enrolled in a CTE Health Science program. She wants to enter the healthcare field as soon as possible to start earning income, but she also has long-term goals of becoming a Registered Nurse. She has two realistic options: complete a CNA certification program now and begin working within a few months, or enroll directly in a two-year Associate Degree in Nursing (ADN) program after graduation and become an RN. Maria must weigh the short-term financial benefits of starting work quickly against the higher long-term earning potential of the RN credential. Her family has limited savings, and she is trying to make the most economically sound decision for her future.

### Option A: Complete CNA Certification First, Then Pursue RN

#### Costs:

- Maria will earn a lower starting wage (\$18-\$22/hour) compared to what she could earn as an RN (\$35-\$45/hour).
- The overall timeline to reach RN status is longer because she adds the CNA step before beginning her ADN program.
- She may need to balance working as a CNA while attending nursing school, which can be physically and academically demanding.

#### Benefits:

- Maria can begin earning income within weeks or months, helping to support herself and her family sooner.
- She gains real clinical experience and patient communication skills that strengthen her nursing school application and performance.
- The CNA role provides a low-risk way to confirm that hands-on healthcare work is the right fit before committing to a longer degree program.

### Option B: Enroll Directly in a Two-Year ADN Program After Graduation

#### Costs:

- Maria must wait until after high school graduation and then complete two years of school before earning any nursing income.
- The ADN program requires tuition and living expenses for two years without the income that working as a CNA would provide.
- Without prior clinical experience, Maria may find the transition into nursing school more challenging and less informed by real-world patient care.

#### Benefits:

- Maria reaches the RN credential and the higher wage range (\$35-\$45/hour) more quickly than if she adds a CNA step first.
- As an RN, she has a broader scope of practice, greater job flexibility, and access to more work environments such as hospitals and emergency rooms.
- The RN credential positions her for faster advancement toward BSN completion or advanced practice roles, increasing her lifetime earning potential significantly.

1. What is the opportunity cost of Maria choosing Option A (CNA first) instead of Option B (direct ADN enrollment)?

2. How might Maria's family financial situation influence which option provides the greatest overall benefit? Use specific wage information from the scenario to support your answer.

3. Which option would you recommend for Maria, and why? Identify at least one cost and one benefit from your chosen option to justify your reasoning.

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## Multiple Choice

Choose the best answer for each question based on what you have learned about nursing career pathways. Select one answer (A, B, C, or D) for each item.

- Which nursing role represents the entry point into hands-on patient care and can often be completed while still in high school?
  - Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA)
  - Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN)
  - Registered Nurse with an Associate Degree (RN-ADN)
  - Nurse Practitioner (NP)
- Approximately how long does it take to complete a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) education program?
  - 4 to 12 weeks
  - One year of post-secondary education
  - Two years at a community college
  - Four years at a university
- What exam must a graduate pass to become a Registered Nurse after completing an Associate Degree in Nursing?
  - NCLEX-PN
  - USMLE
  - NCLEX-RN
  - CNA Certification Exam

4. Which of the following best describes the main advantage of earning a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) compared to an Associate Degree in Nursing (ADN)?

- A. BSN graduates can skip the NCLEX-RN licensing exam
- B. BSN graduates are more competitive for leadership and specialized roles
- C. BSN programs take less time to complete than ADN programs
- D. BSN graduates are only allowed to work in community clinics

5. Which advanced practice nursing role is known for administering anesthesia and earning among the highest salaries in the nursing profession?

- A. Certified Nurse Midwife (CNM)
- B. Nurse Practitioner (NP)
- C. Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist (CRNA)
- D. Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN)

6. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, by approximately how much are registered nursing jobs projected to grow through 2032?

- A. 2%
- B. 6%
- C. 15%
- D. 25%

7. What is one key difference between the scope of practice of an LPN and an RN?

- A. LPNs can independently diagnose patients, while RNs cannot
- B. RNs can independently assess patients and create care plans, while LPNs have a more limited scope
- C. LPNs require a four-year degree, while RNs only need a two-year degree
- D. RNs work only in nursing homes, while LPNs work in hospitals

8. Why is continuing education considered an important expectation at every level of the nursing career ladder?

- A. It allows nurses to change careers into other fields more easily
- B. It is required to keep credentials current and maintain professional standards
- C. It replaces the need for licensing exams at higher levels
- D. It is only required for CNAs and LPNs, not for RNs

9. A student wants to enter the healthcare workforce quickly and begin earning income within a year or less. Which nursing pathway best fits this goal?

- A. Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN)
- B. Nurse Practitioner (NP) master's program
- C. Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) or LPN program
- D. Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist (CRNA) doctoral program

10. International Nurses Day is celebrated on May 12th each year to mark the birthday of which historical figure credited with founding modern nursing?

- A. Clara Barton
- B. Florence Nightingale
- C. Dorothea Dix
- D. Mary Seacole

## True / False

Read each statement carefully. Write T if the statement is true or F if the statement is false based on what you have learned about nursing career pathways.

1. Nursing is a single job with one set of responsibilities and one level of education required.

- True    False

2. A Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) can complete their training in as little as 4 to 12 weeks.

- True    False

3. Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs) work completely independently without supervision from RNs or physicians.

- True    False

4. A Registered Nurse with an Associate Degree (RN-ADN) must pass the NCLEX-RN exam to become licensed.

- True    False

5. A Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) takes approximately two years to complete.

- True    False

6. Nurse Practitioners (NPs) have the authority to diagnose conditions and prescribe medications.

- True    False

7. Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists (CRNAs) are among the lowest-paid nurses in the healthcare field.

- True    False

8. Continuing education and license renewal are expectations at every level of the nursing career ladder.

- True    False

9. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that registered nursing jobs will grow by 6% through 2032.

- True    False

10. International Nurses Day is celebrated on May 12th to honor the birthday of Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing.

- True    False

## Vocabulary

Review each term and its definition below. These words appear in the lesson article and are essential for understanding nursing career pathways. Study them carefully before completing the lesson activities.

### Career Ladder

A series of progressively higher-level jobs in a field, each requiring more education or experience and offering greater responsibility and pay.

Explain in your own words:

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### Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA)

An entry-level healthcare worker who assists patients with daily activities like bathing and eating, and reports changes in patient condition to nurses.

Explain in your own words:

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### Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN)

A nurse who completes about one year of post-secondary education and can administer medications and perform basic procedures under the supervision of an RN or physician.

Explain in your own words:

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### **Registered Nurse (RN)**

A licensed nurse who can independently assess patients, create care plans, administer medications, and coordinate with the full healthcare team.

Explain in your own words:

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### **Scope of Practice**

The specific tasks, procedures, and responsibilities that a healthcare professional is legally permitted to perform based on their education and license.

Explain in your own words:

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### **NCLEX**

A standardized national licensing exam that nursing graduates must pass in order to become a licensed practical nurse or registered nurse.

Explain in your own words:

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### **Nurse Practitioner (NP)**

An advanced practice nurse with a graduate degree who can diagnose medical conditions and prescribe medications, often working with greater independence than an RN.

Explain in your own words:

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**Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist (CRNA)**

A highly specialized advanced practice nurse who administers anesthesia to patients and is among the highest-paid nursing professionals in the country.

Explain in your own words:

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**Continuing Education**

Ongoing learning and training that healthcare professionals are required to complete in order to keep their licenses current and stay up to date in their field.

Explain in your own words:

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**Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN)**

A four-year college degree in nursing that prepares graduates for leadership roles, specialized units, and positions that require advanced clinical and management skills.

Explain in your own words:

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## Exit Ticket

Answer both questions in 1-2 sentences using what you learned in today's lesson. Be specific and use vocabulary from the lesson.

1. Describe TWO different nursing roles from the career ladder and explain one key difference between them in terms of education or responsibilities.

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2. Why is it important to consider both your personal goals AND the educational requirements when choosing a nursing career pathway?

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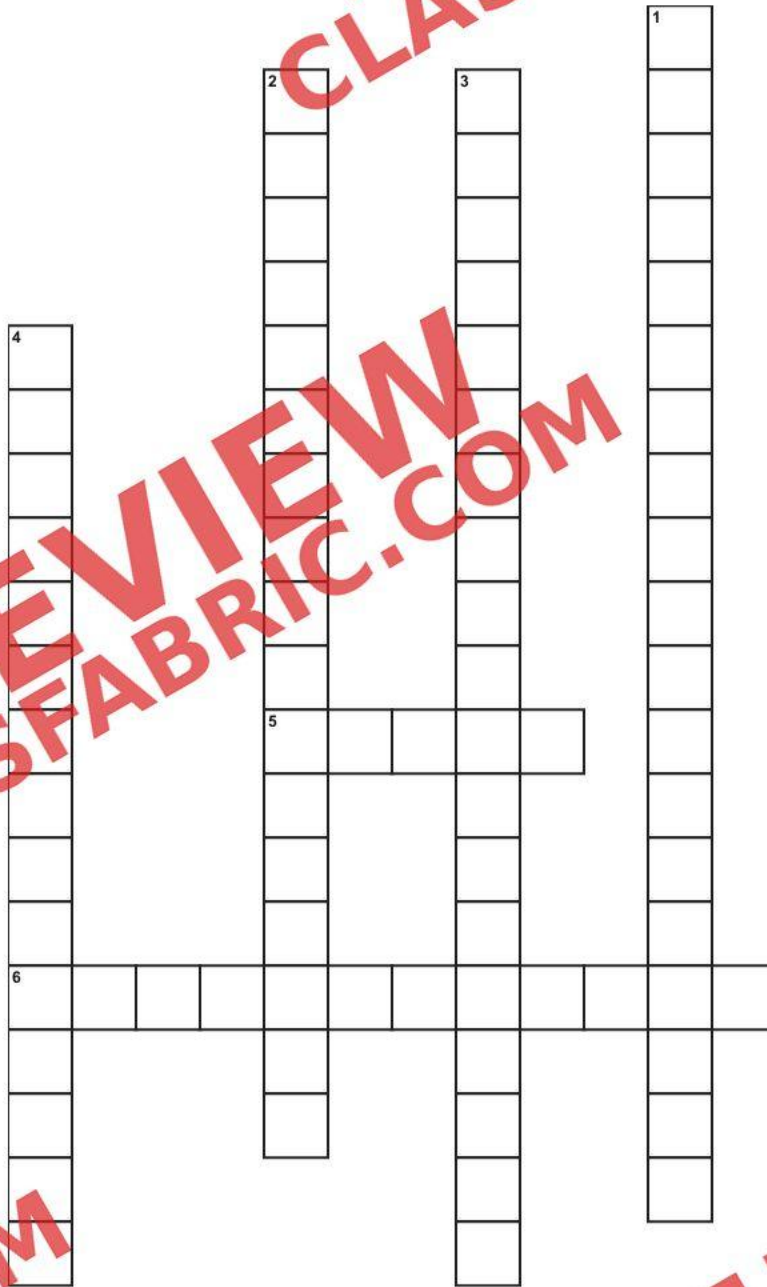
Nurses are often the first and most consistent point of contact in healthcare, providing comfort and care during some of a patient's most difficult moments.



Every May 12th, International Nurses Day honors the dedication and compassion that nurses bring to their communities around the world.

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## CROSSWORD PUZZLE



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## CROSSWORD PUZZLE

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### ACROSS

5. A standardized national licensing exam that nursing graduates must pass in order to become a licensed practical nurse or registered nurse.
6. A series of progressively higher-level jobs in a field, each requiring more education or experience and offering greater responsibility and pay.

### DOWN

1. An advanced practice nurse with a graduate degree who can diagnose medical conditions and prescribe medications, often working with greater independence than an RN.
2. A licensed nurse who can independently assess patients, create care plans, administer medications, and coordinate with the full healthcare team.
3. Ongoing learning and training that healthcare professionals are required to complete in order to keep their licenses current and stay up to date in their field.
4. The specific tasks, procedures, and responsibilities that a healthcare professional is legally permitted to perform based on their education and license.

# From Bedside to Board: Understanding Nursing Career Pathways

## WORD SEARCH

N F Z H W S Y F V S S O W I L R B T W M V V B T  
U N C L E X Z F E T J U V W I P J I J L O P G N  
R H O Y O Y H F M M U V P G L J B E P I A X K U  
S Q B V I R E G I S T E R E D N U R S E R N B G  
E M R T J J O C Z I M I V N G K V Z X B I N D Y  
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A Y O S D F I T Z V X E L L J I X F C F M M I X  
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T Y U O F W O N U O O P P D J V J E P C G D X B  
I W W C K L C U T Z H Z I B M F Z T E A Z F E P  
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I M F F P K B N W A N B C L T R V P F E B L B U  
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N D P S J O B E Q R M S R P X W T M R R N U B F  
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R F E S Q P M U B Z B Q P X Z R A X C A P O L K  
N N A F E G Q C W B G I A J J G K A T D V K F E  
P P W J S P W A K O D V L Y A E Q D I D Q W V F  
A D F R A J W T J Z D Y A F Z K V B C E J F D T  
K Z Z E R M Y I V K O C B R Y K M Y E R V U V O  
W M I I U E L O U U T V B F X T M A Y B L Y R O  
D I Z M X A D N I T G A N O W T W S R V Q N N K  
X N G S I T Z K I W M P N I D R U F G E V U A Y

### FIND THESE WORDS

NCLEX  
Career Ladder

Continuing Education  
Nurse Practitioner (NP)

Scope of Practice

Registered Nurse (RN)