

Nursing Medical Terminology Cheat Sheet

Common Nursing Terms

While it's normal not to understand everything as a nursing student, learning some words will help you be more comfortable and prepared for your first clinical experiences. Check out the medical terminology for nursing students to prepare.

- **Clinicals:** Hands-on nursing training in a healthcare setting
- **Code:** A hospital term for an emergency (for example, Code Blue for cardiac arrest)
- **Crash cart:** A rolling cart of medications and supplies used in emergencies
- **EMR/EHR:** Electronic medical or health record (for example, [Epic](#) is a common EMR)
- **Handoff:** The transfer of patient information during shift changes, also referred to as "report"
- **Isolation:** Precautions for patients with contagious conditions (for example, contact precautions, droplet precautions, etc.)
- **Preceptor:** An experienced nurse assigned to mentor and supervise students
- **PRN:** From the Latin pro re nata, meaning "as needed," often referring to medications or treatments
- **Rounds:** A routine check of patients by healthcare providers
- **Stat:** From the Latin statim, which means "immediately," often used for urgent tasks or medications that need to be completed within a short timeframe
- **Vitals (VS):** Measurements of temperature, pulse, respiration, and blood pressure

Nursing Acronyms and Abbreviations

- **ABC:** Airway, breathing, circulation — the order of assessment and intervention for patients in emergency situations, such as during a Code Blue
- **PPE:** Personal protective equipment, such as masks and gowns used to protect staff while they care for a patient on specific isolation precautions
- **OOB:** Out of bed
- **CBR:** Complete bed rest
- **NPO:** Nothing by mouth, from the Latin nil per os, used on patients who are preparing for surgery or having trouble swallowing
- **DNR:** Do not resuscitate, meaning that this patient should not receive CPR if their heart stops
- **Hx:** The patient's medical, surgical, or family history
- **Dx:** Diagnosis
- **R/O:** Rule out

See our complete guide to [nursing acronyms and their meanings](#).

Basic Assessments

Remember our patient note from the beginning of this article? The following nursing medical terminology list is packed with abbreviations and acronyms you might see in a nursing or medical note. You'll need to know these terms to perform and document your first [head-to-toe assessments](#).

- **WNL:** Within normal limits
- **AOx4:** Alert and oriented to person, place, time, and situation
- **HR:** Heart rate
- **RR:** Respiratory rate
- **PERRLA:** Pupils equal, rounds, reactive to light and accommodation
- **SOB:** Shortness of breath
- **Hgb:** Hemoglobin, a marker of the patient's oxygen-carrying capacity in their blood
- **WBC:** White blood cells, a marker of infection or inflammation
- **IV:** Intravenous
- **NS:** Normal saline
- **Telemetry:** Heart monitor

Nursing Equipment

- **Sphygmomanometer (blood pressure cuff):** Squeezes a patient's arm to determine the force of their blood
- **Pulse ox/oximeter:** A device that measures the oxygen in a patient's blood
- **Saline lock:** An additional piece of tubing on an IV that holds saline and makes the site easier to access
- **Glucometer:** Handheld device for checking blood glucose levels, typically for patients with diabetes
- **Suction catheter:** A tool for removing secretions from a patient's mouth or airway
- **Foley:** A tube connected to a bag that is inserted into the patient's urethra to collect urine
- **EKG machine:** Separate from a telemetry device, this machine captures a more detailed view of the heart's rhythms
- **Nasal cannula:** A tube with prongs attached that sits under a patient's nose, channeling a percentage of oxygen
- **Liters of O2/oxygen:** Concentration of oxygen a patient is receiving in a nasal cannula or other oxygen delivery device (for example, 2L O2)

Nurse Slang

- **Crashing:** When a patient's condition is rapidly deteriorating

- **Code Brown:** A messy bowel movement
- **Total:** A patient who needs complete assistance
- **Walkie-talkie:** A patient who is mobile and able to communicate clearly
- **Frequent flyer:** A patient who frequently visits the hospital or clinic
- **Waste:** Discarding unused or leftover controlled medication with supervision (for example, asking another nurse, “Will you waste with me?” while discarding opioids)
- **Sundowning:** Confusion or agitation in the evenings and nighttime

Specialty-Specific Nursing Medical Terminology

Depending on where you’re rotating, you might see these specific nursing specialty terms. Review these lists of nursing medical terminology and definitions before you switch clinical areas to be prepared. And if you’re not sure what your next specialty unit is, check out our [guide to nursing specialties](#).

Common Nursing Specialties

You might rotate through several specialties and [hospital units](#) in your clinical experiences in [acute care](#). Learn more about possible specialties and what nursing terms you can expect with the following list:

- Cardiac
- Emergency department
- ICU
- Labor and delivery
- Med-surg
- MICU
- NICU
- Oncology
- Operating room
- PACU
- Pediatrics
- PICU
- Progressive care
- Psych
- STICU

Common Terms in Adult Med-Surg Units

- **CP:** Chest pain
- **LE:** Lower extremities
- **CHF:** Congestive heart failure, a condition where the heart struggles to pump blood effectively

- **DKA:** Diabetic ketoacidosis, a serious complication of diabetes

Common Terms in Pediatrics

- **APGAR:** A score evaluating a newborn's health immediately after birth
- **Cyanosis:** Bluish skin discoloration due to oxygen deprivation
- **FTT:** Failure to thrive, often used in reference to poor weight gain or development

Common Terms in the Emergency Department

- **Triage:** The process of prioritizing patient care based on the severity of their condition
- **GCS:** Glasgow Coma Scale, used to assess a patient's level of consciousness

Common Terms in the ICU

- **Vasopressor:** A medication used to increase blood pressure in critically ill patients
- **Sepsis:** A life-threatening infection causing systemic inflammation
- **ARDS:** Acute respiratory distress syndrome, a severe lung condition
- **CRRT:** Continuous renal replacement therapy, a type of dialysis used in ICU settings
- **Ventilator:** A machine that forces air into the patient's lungs
- **ECMO:** Extracorporeal membrane oxygenation, a machine that adds oxygen to the patient's blood so that their lungs can rest

Common Terms in Labor and Delivery

- **GTPAL:** Gravida, Term, Preterm, Abortions, Living, used to summarize a patient's obstetric history
- **ROM:** Rupture of membranes, signaling the beginning of labor
- **NST:** Nonstress test, monitors fetal heart rate and contractions

Education, Licenses, and Professional Acronyms

Many healthcare facilities require staff to display their credentials on their [badge reels](#). Here's a breakdown of the common professional acronyms and nursing medical terminology you might see on any given nursing unit.

- **APRN:** Advanced practice nurse. There are [4 types of APRNs](#)
 - **NM:** Nurse midwife (sometimes called a CNM or certified nurse midwife)
 - **NP:** Nurse practitioner (sometimes called a CRNP or certified registered nurse practitioner). Learn more about [nurse practitioner credentials](#).
 - **CNS:** Clinical nurse specialist
 - **CRNA:** Certified registered nurse anesthetist
- **CM:** Case manager

- **CNA:** Certified nursing assistant (sometimes also called a nurse aide, depending on the state)
- **LPN/LVN:** Licensed professional or vocational nurse
- **MD:** Medical doctor, also called a physician. The physician who is responsible for a patient's care is often called an attending.
- **OT:** Occupational therapist
- **PA:** Physician assistant, sometimes called a physician's associate. PAs and NPs are also referred to as mid-level providers.
- **PT:** Physical therapist
- **RN:** Registered nurse
- **RT:** Respiratory therapist

In addition, you might want to be aware of these nursing [degree levels](#) and educational acronyms:

- **ADN:** Associate Degree in Nursing
- **BSN:** Bachelor of Science in Nursing
- **MSN:** Master of Science in Nursing
- **MPH:** Master of Public Health
- **PhD:** Philosophical Doctorate
- **DNP:** Doctor of Nursing Practice

Training and Credentials Acronyms

Below are some common training and credentials you might see on your colleagues' badges. Check out our [guide to nursing credentials](#) to learn more about this kind of nursing medical terminology.

Medical and Nursing Training

- **ACLS:** Advanced Cardiovascular Life Support, focusing on managing cardiac emergencies, this training is required in many ICU settings
- **-BC:** Board Certification, usually tacked onto the end of a specialty credential
- **BLS:** Basic Life Support, a required training for most clinical settings
- **CPI Certification:** De-escalation techniques for high-pressure situations
- **NIHSS:** National Institute of Health Stroke Scale
- **NRP:** Neonatal Resuscitation Program
- **PALS:** Pediatric Advanced Life Support, training for managing emergencies in child patients
- **S.T.A.B.L.E.:** A training for stabilizing an infant after resuscitation

Nursing Specialty Credentials

When you look at an experienced nurse's credentials, you might notice letters behind RN. These nursing medical terminology letters may be additional degrees, but they can also be certifications such as the ones below:

- **AMB-BC:** Ambulatory Care Nursing Certification
- **CCM:** Certified Case Manager
- **CCRN:** Critical Care Registered Nurse
- **CEN:** Certified Emergency Nurse
- **CFCN:** Certified Foot Care Nurse
- **CHRN:** Certified Hyperbaric Registered Nurse
- **CNML:** Certified Nurse Manager Leader
- **CNOR:** Certified Perioperative Nurse
- **CNRN:** Certified Neuroscience Registered Nurse
- **CPN:** Certified Pediatric Nurse
- **CRRN:** Certified Rehabilitation Registered Nurse
- **CSC:** Cardiac Surgery Certification
- **CVRN:** Cardiovascular Registered Nurse
- **CWOCN:** Certified Wound and Ostomy Care Nurse
- **NEA-BC:** Nurse Executive Advanced Board Certification
- **NPD:** Nursing Professional Development Certification
- **PCCN:** Progressive Care Certified Nurse
- **PMH-BC:** Psychiatric Nursing Board Certification
- **RNC-MNN:** Registered Nurse Certification in Maternal Newborn Nursing
- **TCRN:** Trauma Certified Registered Nurse