

A career in nursing and midwifery

This *Prospects*, written by experts in nursing and midwifery, will help you understand how you can prepare yourself for a career combining science with compassion



Understanding the emotional bond between a mother and her child

Being a nurse or midwife is both exciting and rewarding because you are able to apply your knowledge of biological, physical and social sciences to real-life situations.

Key words ↓

Healthcare
Team work
Professional
Research

There are four options for studying at degree level that can lead to a career in nursing. These are:

- adult nursing — providing healthcare for those over the age of 18
- child nursing — providing care from birth to 18
- mental health nursing — working with people who have mental health and emotional issues that give them significant problems in coping with everyday life and learning
- learning disabilities nursing — working with people who have physical and other difficulties with daily living activities

A degree in midwifery will train you for a career and as the lead carer for women experiencing normal childbirth. Midwives also work with other medical professionals to provide care for pregnant women with more complex needs. Midwives and nurses work in a variety of settings, including hospitals, the community, the home, industry, research and education. There is a wide choice of career options and specialities to suit many different interests.

Team work is an essential element of nurses' and midwives' work and this involves collaborating and working closely with other professionals such as doctors, physiotherapists and social workers. All nurses and midwives need a good understanding of biological sciences. They also need to understand scientific terminology to be able to talk to each other about human health issues. For example, knowledge about the physiology of the heart, the normal and abnormal biochemistry of blood, and the control of breathing and respiration are all important in making decisions about the care and welfare of patients.

Nurses and midwives usually study at university for 3 years but some courses are 4 years long and lead to a Masters (higher) degree instead of the usual Bachelors degree. At least a third of your course will involve either the direct study of biomedical sciences, such as biology, anatomy, physiology and pharmacology, or the application

of biological sciences to specific healthcare conditions, for example diabetes. Nursing and social sciences theories from psychology and sociology are also important parts of the subjects that you will study.

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) insists that all practitioners must complete equal amounts of theory and practice during their course. This might mean 2 full days in university and 3 days in practice working alongside a qualified nurse who acts as your mentor. The mentor's role is to provide support and guidance as well as undertaking an assessment of your practice. On some courses, students undertake blocks of time in their practice areas and a block of time in university. On successful completion of the course you are entitled to register with the NMC, which awards you the right to practise as a nurse or midwife and your licence to practise is validated on qualification and then yearly by the NMC.

The nursing and midwifery degree course

The core subjects you will study include the biomedical and biological sciences (anatomy, physiology, pharmacology and pathology) and social sciences (psychology and sociology). You will also study field-specific subjects such as acute care of adults (people who have sudden life-threatening illnesses such as heart attacks), children or people with mental health problems (for example, depression), ongoing or chronic illness management in children, adults (for example, asthma or diabetes) and people with mental health problems (such as drug and alcohol problems). You will also be given the opportunity to learn about and care for patients in recovery and rehabilitation from healthcare problems in your chosen field (for example, stroke patients). This requires an in-depth understanding and application of the biological and social sciences to the practice of nursing or midwifery care and support.

The midwifery programme is designed to develop your competence and confidence and to get your career off to a great start. As well as the essential biological and social sciences (for example, an understanding of basic genetics, normal and abnormal anatomy and biology), most programmes have a strong focus on developing your midwifery skills so you have a real impact on the health of mothers and babies. There is a strong leadership theme in both nursing and midwifery programmes, designed to help you work effectively with a range of different professionals.

Is nursing right for you?

This is a tough question to answer if you have little experience of working in healthcare. Recently, the NMC and the chief nurse for the UK have called for a return to basic values, with care, compassion and competence figuring among the key attributes that we look for when recruiting and aim to develop in all practitioners. The ability to work with people who may be vulnerable and needy is a key skill. The desire to offer people comfort, support and solace are vital attributes. Having compassion for others means being able to anticipate their difficulties and understand their feelings. This insight is gained through experience and knowledge of their physical



Learning the biology of normal pregnancy

condition and of their social circumstances. So students must draw on knowledge from both the sciences and the arts.

During your course you will combine science with the study of psychology, counselling, sociology and ethics. This will complement the science subjects in providing you with the skills and knowledge to provide all round care to patients. Competence is the ability to apply your knowledge (including the latest research evidence) and your practical skills to support patients or service users and to ensure you are offering the best care. These skills and abilities must be developed during the course but many applicants realise that they have these attributes to some degree already (or maybe others have highlighted them in you!).

Nursing and midwifery work is demanding and is constantly changing. It is essential to stay at the forefront of biological and medical research, social science knowledge and caring activities. Most newly qualified nurses finish their training with at least a year of hospital-based experience before specialising in their chosen field of care. Increasingly, many nurses will begin their careers in primary care — the term used to describe all of the services provided by your general practice surgery — and this will be where most care is provided in the near future. More healthcare is now provided by GPs (for example, managing patients with diabetes) because it is believed that local care in the community is more acceptable to patients and their families.

Newly qualified midwives and nurses work through a special practical programme (including hospital and community work), helping them consolidate their skills and increase their confidence as they assume their responsibilities. This occurs typically during the first year after qualifying as a nurse or a midwife.

Applying to study nursing or midwifery at university

The entry criteria for nursing and midwifery courses vary widely across different universities and there are a number of initiatives to encourage people who have a range of backgrounds and educational

Further information

www.nhscareers.nhs.uk/explore-by-career/nursing

www.nhscareers.nhs.uk/explore-by-career/midwifery/training-to-be-a-midwife

http://nursing.nhscareers.nhs.uk/why/myth_busting



qualifications to apply for entry onto a course. Currently 72 universities offer nursing courses and 51 offer midwifery. Learning disabilities courses are less common.

Most universities require that you have at least five GCSE subjects including maths, science and English at grade C or above, along with three A-levels (or their equivalent Scottish Higher or Irish Leaving qualifications) including a science, for example biology. It is not uncommon for A-level grades of ABB or above (or equivalent) to be expected for

entry into midwifery, BBB for child nursing, BBC for adult nursing and BCC for mental-health nursing. There is intense competition for places on nursing and midwifery courses. It is not unusual to have four suitable (those who have the correct entry qualifications) applicants for each place on a nursing or midwifery course.

Like most medical or health-related courses that involve dealing directly with the public, an offer of a place on a nursing or midwifery course is subject to satisfactory enhanced Disclosure and Barring assessment (this establishes whether you have been accused or convicted of a criminal offence) and a robust review of your health, which will involve a report from your GP and a medical examination by the university occupational health department. While neither a minor conviction nor an ongoing health problem would stop your application progressing, you must contact the university's occupational health department or admissions team if you are concerned about either a conviction or health issue.

As there is a high demand for places, your personal statement and your educational reference are key to securing an interview. All nursing and midwifery applicants have a face-to-face individual or group interview and will usually be required to undertake both literacy and numeracy tests. You must consult the university website for details of what is required in your personal statement. For nursing you must explain your reasons for wanting to study your chosen field of nursing (adult, child, learning disability or mental health), your commitment to caring for others (demonstrated through voluntary work or any work experience), your academic ability (demonstrated through your educational studies) and transferable skills (demonstrated through part-time work or leisure activities). The most important element of your personal statement is honesty and commitment to nursing and this should be reflected in your educational reference. Midwifery courses will require you to be highly motivated to learn, to indicate your commitment to meeting women's needs by finding out about the profession of

Table 1 Examples of career and further training post-qualification, which enable nurses to take on a new role where understanding biological sciences is essential

Field of nursing	Career choice	Further training	Comments
Adult, child, mental health or learning disability	Specialist community nurse (district nurse, health visitor, community psychiatric nurse)	1 year post-qualification training	Enables nurses to practice in the community and manage their own patients
Midwifery	Specialist neo-natal intensive care nurse	University-based specialist course often leading to a diploma in practice	Enables some nurses but usually midwives to work with seriously ill newborn babies
Adult or child	Intensive care of adults or children	University-based specialist course often leading to a diploma in practice	Enables nurses to care for patients who are seriously ill/injured (e.g. road traffic accidents)
Adult, child, mental health and midwifery	Specialist nurse prescriber	University-based course in pharmacology and prescribing law	Enables nurses to prescribe medication for patients without contacting a doctor
All fields of nursing	Nurse practitioner	University-based course usually at Masters level (higher than degree) in assessment and diagnosis of illness	Enables nurses to assess, diagnose and treat patients with specific illnesses (e.g. asthma) or in particular places (NHS walk-in or emergency care centres)

midwifery through reading or by speaking to a midwife, and to demonstrate the skills you will bring to the course by writing about your work or voluntary experiences.

Some universities require you to have some health-related experience, such as working in a nursing home or working with children for example, so check this on the individual university website. Whatever the requirements of the individual university you will need to highlight your skills (both academic and practical) in your application. As part of your research, visit as many schools of nursing and midwifery as possible and read about relevant healthcare issues.

Career opportunities in nursing and midwifery

The career opportunities available to you as a nurse or midwife are many. You can work in a hospital or community setting, or you can specialise in some aspect of care — for example, intensive care nursing or providing midwifery services for young parents (see Table 1 for some examples). You can stay in the UK or work in many places around the world. This may require you to sit further examinations in some places, such as the USA and Canada.

A career in healthcare research is an option that will allow you to add to the body of knowledge we desperately need to develop, improve and underpin nursing and midwifery practice. There are also opportunities to do further study and develop into other roles, for example as a health visitor or other public health worker, for example a school nurse.

After gaining some experience, nurses can develop advanced clinical roles, becoming independent or specialist nurse practitioners where they can manage adults or children with acute or ongoing health needs (see Table 1). This often involves prescribing or adapting medications and helping people to lead a full and rewarding life even when they have ongoing health problems.

Finally, nurses and midwives can become service managers in hospital or community settings, where they develop skills in organising the delivery of healthcare and developing services to meet new healthcare needs and challenges.

If you enjoy science and working with people then a career in nursing or midwifery could be the right choice for you. However you choose to develop yourself in the future, an exciting, satisfying, and ever-changing career awaits you.

Things to do

- Try this 'personality' quiz:

http://nursing.nhscareers.nhs.uk/careers/personality_quiz

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