NCLEX-RN Exam Guide

2026 test plan: format, CAT pass rules, content weights, eligibility, an 8-week plan and test-day tips

RN Basics
rnbasics.com · checked Oct 2026

THE EXAM AT A GLANCE

FEATURE	NCLEX-RN (2026)
Format	Computerized adaptive (CAT), 85 to 150 items
Time	5 hours, breaks included
Scored at minimum	70 (52 content-area + 18 case-study)
Unscored	15 pretest items; you can't tell which
Clinical judgment	3 six-item case studies + about 10% stand-alone items
Passing standard	0.00 logits (not a percent), through Mar 31, 2029
Fee (US)	$200; $350 if registered from Feb 1, 2027
Where	Pearson VUE test centers; no at-home testing in 2026
Official results	From your board, within 6 weeks
Quick Results	Unofficial; 2 business days; $7.95; participating US boards

Formats: multiple choice, select all that apply, select N, grouping, matrix, drop-down, drag-and-drop (including bow-tie), highlight, fill-in-the-blank calculation.

EXAM TIP Length does not reveal your result: CAT stops once it is 95% sure you are above or below the standard. Out of time before 85 items is a fail; after 85, your final ability estimate decides.

WHAT IS ON IT

2026 Test Plan, in effect April 1, 2026 to March 31, 2029. Any one exam may vary by up to 3% per area.

Same percentages as 2023; the safety area was renamed.

CLIENT NEEDS AREA	SHARE OF ITEMS
Management of Care	15–21%
Safety and Infection Prevention and Control	10–16%
Health Promotion and Maintenance	6–12%
Psychosocial Integrity	6–12%
Basic Care and Comfort	6–12%
Pharmacological and Parenteral Therapies	13–19%
Reduction of Risk Potential	9–15%
Physiological Adaptation	11–17%

EXAM TIP Each case study walks the six clinical judgment steps: recognize cues, analyze cues, prioritize hypotheses, generate solutions, take action, evaluate outcomes. Know what each step asks.

WHO CAN TAKE IT

- Your board of nursing sets eligibility; NCSBN keeps no master list.
- Apply to your board and register with Pearson VUE using your program code. Once eligible, Pearson emails your Authorization to Test (ATT); then schedule.
- A registration stays open 365 days for the board to decide; if it lapses, the fee is lost.
- The ATT window is set by the board (average 90 days) and cannot be extended.
- Request testing accommodations from the board before registering.
- Fail? Your board sends a Candidate Performance Report with strengths by test-plan area. Retake after 45 or more days, up to 8 times a year; boards may be stricter.

HOW TO STUDY

1. Week 1: Read the test plan, set your exam date in the app and do 20 questions per subject as a baseline. Clear Daily Review every day.
2. Week 2: Management of Care and Safety, about a third of the exam. Read every rationale.
3. Week 3: Pharmacology and Physiological Adaptation, plus the Electrolyte, ABG and Rhythm Gallery One-Pagers.
4. Week 4: The other four subjects. Start Case Studies, two a day.
5. Week 5: First adaptive Mock Exam. Review every miss.
6. Week 6: Weakest Subject and Missed Questions daily. Read the Sepsis and Shock Types One-Pagers.
7. Weeks 7–8: Second Mock Exam and more Case Studies, then only Daily Review and Trouble Questions; nothing new in the last two days.

TEST-DAY TIPS

- Bring one physical, unexpired, government photo ID with signature (or a second, signed ID). The name must match your registration exactly. International centers, including Puerto Rico, take only a passport.
- Arrive 30 minutes early for photo, palm vein scan and security scan. Over 30 minutes late can forfeit the appointment and fee.
- Electronics, smart watches included, go in a sealed Pearson bag; remove other watches too. Earplugs come only from the test administrator.
- You get an on-screen calculator and erasable note board. Answer every item; you cannot skip or go back.
- Bolded words (first, priority, most) matter. No client age given? Assume an adult.
- Labs show normal ranges; drugs appear mostly by generic name. Exhibit items keep chart data behind on-screen tabs.
- Optional breaks at about 2 and 3.5 hours count against your 5 hours.

EXAM TIP Select-all-that-apply scores plus/minus: wrong picks subtract, but the item never drops below zero. Select-N items score 0/1, so a wrong pick costs nothing. Choose only options you can defend.

SAFETY Reschedule at least one full business day (24 hours) ahead; for Saturday to Monday slots, by Friday. A no-show or late change forfeits the fee and the ATT.

OFFICIAL RESOURCES

- Test plan: nclex.com/test-plans.page
- Candidate Bulletin, Tutorial, Sample Pack, Exam Preview: nclex.com/prepare.page
- Clinical judgment model: nclex.com/clinical-judgment-measurement-model.page
- CAT pass/fail rules: nclex.com/computerized-adaptive-testing.page

NCSBN does not recommend or endorse any review course or study material, this guide and app included.

NCLEX®, NCLEX-RN® and NCSBN® are registered trademarks of the National Council of State Boards of Nursing, Inc.; this guide is not affiliated with NCSBN.

Sources (19) are listed with links at rnbasics.com/sheets/guide-nclex-rn.html. For education and exam preparation only. Not medical advice; follow current guidelines and your institution's protocols. RN Basics is an independent study aid not affiliated with any certifying body.