

DNS-CT

Candidate Handbook



Disclaimer

AAPACN certifications and educational courses were developed to serve as programs and references for long-term care. To the best of our knowledge, they reflect current federal regulations and practices. However, they cannot be considered absolute and universal. The information in these courses must be considered in light of the individual organization and state regulations.

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This handbook reflects the policies and procedures as of March 2026. All policies and procedures are subject to change. If you have any questions or require further information, visit AAPACN.org or contact AAPACN staff toll-free at (800) 768-1880.

Statement of nondiscrimination

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Accreditation

American Association of Post-Acute Care Nursing (AAPACN) is accredited as a provider of nursing continuing professional development by the American Nurses Credentialing Center's Commission on Accreditation.

Director of Nursing Services–Certified (DNS-CT) Candidate Handbook

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Welcome

Congratulations on taking the first step toward earning the Director of Nursing Services—Certified (DNS-CT) credential. The American Association of Post-Acute Care Nursing (AAPACN) established the DNS-CT certification educational courses, exams, and workshops, to promote the highest standards for directors of nursing services in the long-term care profession. Reviewing this handbook is the first step toward joining long-term care professionals who have distinguished themselves with the certification credential.

About AAPACN

The American Association of Post-Acute Care Nursing (AAPACN) represents more than 18,000 post-acute care nurses and professionals working in more than 6,100 facilities. Dedicated to supporting LTPAC nurses and healthcare professionals in providing quality care, AAPACN offers members best-in-class education, certification, resources, and strong collaborative communities.

Whether you're looking to earn one of our respected certifications or just want to brush up your knowledge by taking a course or two, AAPACN keeps you up to date and makes the complexities of long-term care easy to understand.

How to use this Candidate Handbook

This handbook is intended to help you understand the policies and procedures for DNS-CT certification and the steps required to earn and maintain your credential. This handbook is also intended to help you learn about the DNS-CT courses.

Once you decide to pursue the DNS-CT credential, this Candidate Handbook will be a useful reference for you to:

- Review the DNS-CT Body of Knowledge
- Assess your knowledge and professional experience of the content
- Identify gaps in knowledge and develop a personal course of study
- Register for courses
- Study, prepare, and take the DNS-CT certification examination
- Maintain your credential through recertification

AAPACN's educational materials are reviewed and updated by a team of experts to ensure you receive the most up-to-date information related to this complex body of knowledge. No document can address the full list of potential questions, policy details, or future program changes. You are encouraged to use this handbook as a supplement to the information listed on the [AAPACN website](#) as well as information provided by AAPACN staff, whom you can contact toll-free at (800) 768-1880.

Overview

What is the purpose of DNS-CT certification courses?

The DNS-CT designation is setting the national standard in certification and education for directors of nursing services. AAPACN serves the public interest by developing, administering, and reviewing a certification process that reflects current DNS competencies. The goal of DNS-CT certification is to establish that professionals have the knowledge and skills necessary to demonstrate competence in this area. The courses support achievement of the certification credential.

What are the benefits of certification?

Upon completion of your personal course of study and after passing the certification exam with a score of 80% or better, you will be allowed to use the initials DNS-CT to designate your status. This designation indicates you have met a nationally recognized standard of expertise for directors of nursing services for long-term care.

Both individuals and employers can benefit from an individual receiving DNS-CT certification:

<p>Individual professional benefits can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verification by an independent organization of your mastery of the knowledge required to perform your job • Professional growth and development • Enhanced job opportunities 	<p>Organizational benefits can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved quality of care and quality of life for residents • Decreased employee turnover • Improved financial outcomes
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To design the educational path that is right for you, AAPACN has developed the Learning Timeline for AAPACN Education and Resources (Learning Ladder) and AAPACN education Guide: Where Should I Start? Quiz (Where to start quiz) to guide you. You can find these resources on the AAPACN website on the main [Education page](#).

What are the certification requirements?

- Hold a current RN license.
- Have the equivalent of two years of full-time long-term or post-acute care experience, with a minimum of one year of experience as either a DNS or relevant nursing leadership experience.
- Pass the 10 DNS-CT certification exams with a score of 80% or better.

How do I register for certification?

To purchase the DNS-CT courses and exams in the format most beneficial to you, visit the [AAPACN website](#).

How much does education, certification, and recertification cost?

The DNS-CT program consists of 10 courses, offered in several formats to support various learning styles. The associated certification exams are included with the purchase of each educational course. Recertification requires a recertification fee and proof of continuing education hours (CEs) earned over the term of the certification. Pricing is based on cost per course and varies by format. AAPACN members receive substantial discounts.

Getting Ready for the Exam

DNS-CT Body of Knowledge and Educational Courses

AAPACN undertook a rigorous process with numerous experts in the profession to determine the domains and tasks within the DNS-CT Body of Knowledge, in terms of both criticality and importance. The domain emphasis reflects the percentage of exam questions that come from each domain.

The individual courses are listed below according to their affiliated domains.

DNS-CT Body of Knowledge

- **Domain 1: Principles of Leadership** (Domain Emphasis: 15%) – Building the foundation for quality care throughout the nursing department requires effective integration of leadership and management concepts. Managing and developing staff, developing teams, promoting organizational values, and creating evidence-based systems of care are essential to leading nursing services.
 - Tasks
 - Differentiate between leadership and management
 - Promote organizational vision, mission, and values
 - Understand the types of leadership styles and how they impact team function
 - Apply principles of leadership as a role model
 - Develop and foster activities and functions of the nursing management team
 - Lead the nursing department in interprofessional/interdisciplinary team coordination
 - Study courses associated with this domain
 - Leadership & Management for the Nurse Leader
 - Essential Business Skills for the Nurse Leader

- **Domain 2: Individual Skills for Management and Supervision** (Domain Emphasis: 10%) – Leading the long-term care workforce is a dynamic and multi-faceted activity that entails hiring, staffing, scheduling, orientation, training and development, and ongoing performance management. Providing safe work environment and abiding by employment laws are necessary for the retention of an effective and caring work force.
 - Tasks
 - Understand the role of the manager in the nursing department
 - Ensure team compliance with laws governing the organization, residents, employees, and the environment
 - Employ effective interpersonal skills for management
 - Understand and implement effective human resource management
 - Study courses associated with this domain
 - Leadership & Management for the Nurse Leader
 - Human Resource Management for the Nurse Leader

- **Domain 3: Organizational Oversight and Management** (Domain Emphasis: 10%) – Specialized evidence-based nursing knowledge drives oversight of the nursing department in specific resident care areas such as assessment, care planning, clinical and managerial practices, and transitions of care. Incorporating a quality assessment and performance improvement philosophy in all nursing systems ensures that care management and surveillance is coordinated, evaluated, and tracked.
 - Tasks
 - Apply principles of systems thinking for quality in the nursing department
 - Understand and implement principles of staff competencies
 - Describe principles and processes for clinical surveillance of nursing systems
 - Utilize nursing knowledge for oversight of the nursing department in specific resident care areas
 - Study course associated with this domain
 - Care Management and Surveillance Systems for the Nurse Leader

- **Domain 4: Business Acumen for the DNS** (Domain Emphasis: 12%) – Nurse leaders adept at leading within their organizations have a working knowledge about key business and operational processes including strategic planning, fiscal management, informatics, marketing and public relations, and emergency planning. Needed is a keen awareness about the current healthcare environment and its impact on post-acute care to help move the organization forward.
 - Tasks
 - Understand the DNS’s role in horizontal and vertical organizational hierarchies
 - Implement effective strategic planning processes
 - Understand principles of fiscal management
 - Describe the current healthcare environment impacting post-acute care
 - Apply principles of informatics and technology in management to long-term care
 - Identify the role of the DNS in marketing and public relations for the nursing department
 - Understand the principles of person-centered care and customer service
 - Detail the components of contingency planning for emergency management
 - Provide oversight of the RAI/MDS process
 - Study courses associated with this domain
 - Essential Business Skills for the Nurse Leader
 - MDS and Medicare Process Essentials for the Nurse Leader

- **Domain 5: Quality Improvement in the Nursing Department** (Quality of Care) (Domain Emphasis: 13%) – Governance and leadership for skilled nursing facilities require data systems, monitoring systems, systematic analysis, systemic action, and systemic evaluation for improving organizational performance. Nurse leaders utilize quality measures and prioritized monitoring activities while applying the PDSA cycle to determine and establish thresholds for compliance and improvement.
 - Tasks
 - Understand the components of Quality Assurance and Performance Improvement (QAPI)
 - Describe how Quality Measures are used as outcome measures
 - Understand the Five-Star Quality Rating System
 - Study course associated with this domain
 - Quality Assurance and Performance Improvement for the Nurse Leader

- **Domain 6: Regulatory Compliance** (Domain Emphasis: 38%) – Regulatory management is integral to all nursing facility clinical and operational functions. Nurse leaders must have special knowledge about multiple regulatory components, including various types of survey readiness, their management and their enforcement, the Quality Indicator Survey system, risk management, compliance, and ethics.
 - Tasks
 - Demonstrate skills for regulatory survey readiness
 - Apply principles of regulatory survey management
 - Understand the Quality Indicator Survey (QIS) system
 - Ensure the system for compliance and ethics is implemented in the nursing department
 - Implement principles of resident rights and safety
 - Demonstrate understanding of risk management
 - Study courses associated with this domain
 - Survey Readiness 24/7/365 for the Nurse Leader
 - Survey Management and Enforcement for the Nurse Leader
 - Compliance and Ethics Essentials for the Nurse Leader
 - Risk Management for the Nurse Leader

- **Domain 7: Professional Development** (Domain Emphasis: 2%) – Professional nursing is guided by the Scope of Practice Standards and state-specific Nurse Practice Acts. To lead effectively, nurse leaders must identify mechanisms for the evaluation of professional practice, enhance characteristics of personal professionalism, implement strategies for creating a professional work environment, and demonstrate personal responsibility for sustaining and improving professional competencies. Nurse leaders must stay abreast of regulatory and practice changes, network with colleagues, and advocate for the profession to help move the nursing profession forward.
 - Tasks
 - Understand the importance of scope of practice.
 - Describe the process for the DNS to develop personal and professional competencies.
 - Engage in advocacy to enhance the profession of nursing and resident care.
 - Study course associated with this domain
 - Essential Business Skills for the Nurse Leader

What is the format of the exam?

A certification exam accompanies each course and is completed online and accessed through your Learner Dashboard on the AAPACN website. The certification exams are an objective, multiple-choice question format. The questions are designed to test your recall of specific knowledge, as well as your ability to analyze and apply that knowledge to example situations. It is not a timed test. The questions test knowledge of the domains and tasks in the DNS-CT Body of Knowledge. You will be asked to select the correct or best answer from four options. Only one answer is correct for every question.

How do I prepare for the exam?

Content for the examination is not obtained from any one particular source. The DNS-CT Body of Knowledge should be a guideline for study preparation. The educational materials from the online curriculum, as well as the in-person or virtual workshops, provide a basis of knowledge for exam preparation. You should also utilize current journals, textbooks, government documents (see the Government Resources section at the end of this handbook), and other reference material related to the subjects listed in the DNS-CT Body of Knowledge as supplemental preparatory materials for the exam.

After reviewing the DNS-CT Body of Knowledge, you can plan your exam preparation based on your general understanding and working knowledge of the subject areas. For example, because of daily use at your current job, you may have a good understanding and working knowledge of some of the domain areas—these areas may need only a quick review as you prepare for the test. For areas with which you are less familiar, you may decide you need more in-depth study or training before completing the certification exam; you can allocate your study time appropriately.

You should also consider what percentage of the test questions will cover each major content area; this information is listed as the domain emphasis percentage in the DNS-CT Body of Knowledge section of this handbook. By focusing your studies, you can spend extra time as needed to thoroughly understand the most significant sources of content area on the exam.

How are reasonable accommodations made?

If you require reasonable accommodations to complete the certification exams for the program, please contact AAPACN toll-free at (800) 768-1880, or by email at memberexperience@AAPACN.org.

Taking the Exam

What are the requirements during the exam?

AAPACN assigns you a username as a key control in monitoring and verifying user identity in the Learner Dashboard area of the AAPACN website. You create the password for this username. This login information helps ensure that each user's information is available only to the authorized user. As a user of the Learner Dashboard, it is important that you do not share this username, or the password you create for your login, with anyone. You should be the only one to access and complete your exam and course material in your Learner Dashboard.

Once you begin each certification exam, you may complete it either in one sitting or in sections. It is an open-book format, so you may use reference materials when you take the exam. However, you cannot seek assistance from other individuals while completing the exam. The exams are offered on an honor-system basis that assumes you will act in good faith to ensure your performance is an accurate representation of your own personal knowledge and skills related to the subject matter.

AAPACN does not tolerate cheating or any breach of academic or professional ethics that may compromise the security or integrity of its certification exams. All incidents of reported cheating will be investigated. Discussing content found on the certification exams is strictly prohibited; any such posts on Community discussion boards will be removed. Anyone found compromising the security of the exams by attempting to copy, record, or distribute questions in any manner will be permanently excluded from the certification process.

How long do I have to complete a course/exam?

- **Online course(s) and certification examinations** – The educational courses and certification exams are completed through your Learner Dashboard. The courses are offered in a self-paced, interactive online format. The exams are not timed, and you may exit the exam and return at a later time to complete it. Your courses and exams expire one year after purchase. After the one-year expiration date, you will lose access to the course and exam content.

- **Workshop and certification examinations** – The educational content is presented during the in-person or virtual workshop dates. You will take the certification exams separately through your Learner Dashboard. These are not timed, and you may exit the exam and return at a later time to complete it. Your courses and exams expire one year after the start date of the event. After the one-year expiration date, you will lose access to the course and exam content.
- **Exam attempts** – You have three attempts per course to pass the certification exams with a score of 80% or better. The exam itself is not timed, and you do not have to complete it in one sitting. If you have exhausted all exam attempts, you may request additional attempts one time per course. If your request is approved, you will receive an additional three exam attempts. If you do not pass after six attempts, you must wait one year before taking the certification exams again.

In the case of an extenuating circumstance, you can submit a formal, written appeal to request an exception to the policy. To begin the appeals process, log in to your Learner Dashboard and click on the “Apply for Appeal” link in the menu on the left-hand side of the site.

After the Test

How is my information kept confidential?

Information about candidates and their examination results is confidential. AAPACN carefully protects your data from loss, misuse, unauthorized access or disclosure, alteration, or destruction. Within the company, data is stored in password-controlled servers with limited access. Your personal information is never shared outside the company without your permission, unless required by law to comply with a current judicial proceeding, court order, or legal process. If AAPACN is required by law to release your confidential information, you will be notified by email, unless prohibited by law.

How is the exam scored?

The DNS-CT certification exams, as well as educational courses and workshops, set a standard for basic levels of knowledge that can reasonably be expected of long-term care professionals. Your performance on each certification exam will be measured against this predetermined standard to assess your competency in these subject matters. Your performance will not be measured against other candidates taking the certification exam; your individual performance will determine whether you meet the knowledge standards required to pass.

What information will I receive about my score?

Once you have completed the examination, you will be presented with the percentage of questions correctly answered. Based on the percentage, your exam results will indicate “pass” or “fail.” You must achieve a score of 80% or better to pass the exam.

To protect the confidentiality of the exam content, and to maintain the value and integrity of the certification, AAPACN does not provide the correct answers to missed questions on the exam results. The certification exam is intended to measure proficiency in the subject and to determine whether an individual has the knowledge necessary for certification.

When will I receive my score?

The certification exams are self-scoring and provide immediate feedback. Upon completion of the exam, your computer screen will display the percentage of correctly answered questions and indicate “pass” or “fail.” You may access this information at a later date by logging into your Learner Dashboard.

Once you pass the 10 certification exams, you may begin using the initials DNS-CT to designate your status as a certified director of nursing services. Credentials are awarded for a two-year period.

Can I retake the exam if I don't pass?

You have three attempts to pass the certification exam with a score of 80% or better. If you have exhausted all exam attempts, you may request additional attempts one time per course. If your request is approved, you will receive an additional three exam attempts. If you do not pass after six attempts, you must wait one year before taking the certification exams again.

In the case of an extenuating circumstance, you can submit a formal, written appeal to request an exception to the policy. To begin the appeals process, login to your Learner Dashboard and click on the “Apply for Appeal” link in the menu on the left-hand side of the site.

Is there an appeals provision?

AAPACN works diligently to provide top-quality course materials and exams using a standardized process of question development and validation. AAPACN also affords candidates a high level of flexibility in completing the exam. Due to these policies and procedures, an appeal will be heard only in the case of an extenuating circumstance. In this case, you may submit a formal, written appeal to AAPACN to request an exception to the policy. To begin the appeals process, login to your Learner Dashboard and click on the “Apply for Appeal” link in the menu on the left-hand side of the site.

Recertification: Certification Maintenance**When do I need to recertify?**

The DNS-CT certification is valid for two years from your certification completion date. Your credential expires two years from when you completed your exam requirements. Your certification expiration date can be found in the My Certifications area of your Learner Dashboard. You must complete your recertification requirements before the expiration date of your credential. If you do not complete the recertification requirements before your certification expiration date, you will be required to restart the full program to regain your certification at a later date.

What are the recertification requirements?

- Hold a current RN license.
- Hold a current DNS-CT certification.
- Submit a renewal application and pay the renewal fee.

- Complete at least 50 hours of continuing education within the two years preceding the renewal application submission or complete an approved professional development activity equivalent (see below), or a combination of the two.
 - At least 25 hours must be related to the DNS-CT domains.
 - The remaining 25 hours can be for any healthcare-approved continuing education that meets licensure requirements (for a total of 50 hours).

What are approved professional development activity equivalents?

- In-service Education
 - 1 hour of education = 1 continuing education hour
- Academic Credits
 - 1 semester credit = 15 continuing education hours
 - 1 quarter credit = 12.5 continuing education hours
- Presentations
 - 1 hour of presentation = 3 continuing education hours (can only be used one time per presentation)
- Articles (non-peer-reviewed), book chapters, or e-learning equivalent
 - 1 of the above as the author, co-author = 4 continuing education hours
 - 1 of the above as editor, co-editor, reviewer = 3 continuing education hours
- Research, grant writing, peer-reviewed articles, preceptor
 - Contact AAPACN

Keep the documentation to support your continuing education credits. **AAPACN conducts random audits of renewal applications. If your application is selected for audit, you will be required to submit all supporting documents.** Please maintain a copy of your renewal application and the supporting certificates and other documents for the entire two-year certification period in order to satisfy any audit requests.

How much does DNS-CT recertification cost?

Recertification pricing can be found on the [AAPACN website](#).

What if I let my certification lapse?

You must complete your recertification requirements before the expiration date of your credential. If you do not complete the recertification requirements before your certification expiration date, you will be required to restart the full program to regain your certification at a later date.

Resources

Government resources

In addition to the educational courses and workshops described in the DNS-CT Body of Knowledge section, the following list of government resources may be helpful in preparing for the exams. This list does not attempt to include all acceptable or valuable references available. The exam questions are not based solely on any of these resources.

- [*State Operations Manual*](#)
- [*MDS 3.0 for Nursing Homes and Swing Bed Providers*](#)
- [*MDS 3.0 QM User's Manual*](#)
- [*Five-Star Technical User's Guide*](#)
- [*QAPI*](#)