CMC Exam Guide

Format, the November 2026 test plan, eligibility and an 8-week plan for AACN's cardiac medicine subspecialty exam

THE EXAM AT A GLANCE

AACN CMC and Policy Handbooks (Aug, Sep 2026), cut score page

ITEM	DETAIL
Questions	90: 75 scored, 15 unscored pretest
Time	2 hours
Item type	Multiple choice, 4 options
Passing score	50 of 75 scored (exams to 11/18/2026)
Fee	$150 member, $240 nonmember
Retest	$125 member, $170 nonmember
Retakes	Up to 4 per rolling 12 months
Window	180 days after applying (normally 90)
2025 first-time pass rate	71.3%

The revised exam has its own passing standard; check AACN's cut score page before testing.

> **EXAM TIP** Every item tests clinical judgment, mostly at application and analysis level: expect priority and next-action questions.

WHAT IS ON IT

AACN CMC test plans; the older plan sums to 101% from rounding

CONTENT AREA	TO 11/18/2026	FROM 11/19/2026
Cardiovascular conditions	23%	21%
Non-cardiovascular conditions	23%	21%
Therapeutic interventions	39%	44%
Monitoring and diagnostics	16%	14%

New or expanded from 11/19/2026:

- Cardiac arrest; SCAD under ACS
- VADs, temporary and durable (such as Impella, LVAD)
- Drugs: ACEI, ARB, ARNI, MRA, SGLT2i, beta-blockers, CCBs, lipid-lowering, pulmonary vasodilators, sedation and analgesia
- Delirium; fluid and acid-base imbalances
- Chest tubes, oxygen devices, cardiac rehab, cardiac MRI and CT
- Adrenal disorders dropped

> **EXAM TIP** Therapeutic interventions are now 44%: drugs, pacing, ICD and CRT, cath lab care, circulatory support and renal replacement (CRRT, SCUF, hemodialysis).

WHO CAN TAKE IT

- Current, unencumbered U.S. RN or APRN license
- ABSNC- or NCCA-accredited direct-care adult specialty certification, such as CCRN (direct or tele-critical care pathway), PCCN (direct care pathway) or CEN; shown as CCRN-CMC
- 1,750 direct-care hours with acutely or critically ill adults in 2 years (875 in the last year, 875 cardiac), or 2,000 in 5 years (144 in the last year, 1,000 cardiac)
- Hours in the U.S. or Canada, or abroad at a Magnet or JCI-accredited facility
- Audit verifier: clinical supervisor or RN or physician colleague; not yourself or a relative

CMC goes Inactive if the tied certification lapses. Non-AACN proof must be valid 90 days past applying.

Renew every 3 years: 432 hours with acutely or critically ill adult cardiac patients (144 in the last year), a current specialty certification, and 25 Category A Clinical Judgment cardiology CERPs or a passed exam.

HOW TO STUDY

1. Week 1: Take a Mock Exam cold for a baseline; read the new test plan. Start Daily Review.
2. Weeks 2 to 3: Therapeutic interventions, with the IABP Management, Vasopressors and Inotropes, and Ventilator Modes and Settings One-Pagers. Add Impella, ECMO and CRRT.
3. Week 4: Cardiovascular conditions, with Rhythm Gallery and ACLS Algorithms in Brief.
4. Week 5: Non-cardiovascular conditions, with Shock Types at a Glance, Electrolyte Imbalances, ABG Interpretation in 6 Steps and Sedation, Pain and Delirium Scales.
5. Week 6: Monitoring and diagnostics, with Hemodynamic Normals and Capnography. Second Mock Exam.
6. Week 7: Weakest Subject daily; rework Trouble Questions. Third Mock Exam.
7. Week 8: Daily Review, flagged questions, One-Pager skim. Last Mock Exam 3 or more days out.

TEST-DAY TIPS

- Current government photo ID with signature, matching your AACN record. No military or temporary IDs.
- Test center: arrive by your appointment time; over 15 minutes late, no admission. Scratch paper on request.
- Remote: check in 15 to 30 minutes early; check-in can take 60+ minutes. Over 30 minutes late, no admission. Digital notepad only.
- Pace about 80 seconds per item; bookmark hard ones and go back.
- No guessing penalty: answer every item.
- Up to two 5-minute breaks; the clock keeps running.

Exam content is confidential; sharing it can lead to revocation of certification.

> **EXAM TIP** AACN is moving to generic drug names only. Learn drugs by generic name.

OFFICIAL RESOURCES

- CMC Exam Handbook (Aug 2026), with 8 sample questions: aacn.org/certhandbooks
- CMC Test Plan, effective 11/19/2026; page 3 lists Testable Nursing Actions
- CMC Exam Bibliography: 18 titles, such as the 2025 AHA guidelines and AACN Essentials of Critical-Care Nursing (5th ed., 2023)
- Certification Exam Policy Handbook (Sep 2026)
- AACN exam statistics and cut scores page
- AACN CMC Practice Exam and Questions (subscriptions match the new plan): free 7-day, 30-question trial

AACN says current CMC study materials still apply to the revised exam.

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