CSC Exam Guide

Format, blueprint, eligibility and an 8-week plan for AACN's Cardiac Surgery subspecialty exam

THE EXAM AT A GLANCE

FEATURE	CSC EXAM
Questions	90: 75 scored, 15 unscored pretest
Time	2 hours
Item type	Multiple choice, 4 options, one best answer
Format	Scored by number correct; go back, change answers, bookmark
Passing standard	55 of 75 scored correct (raw score, set 1/31/2022)
Cost	$150 AACN member, $240 nonmember; retest $125 / $170
Where	PSI test center or live remote proctoring
Test window	Currently 180 days after you apply (normally 90)
Retakes	Up to 4 attempts in a rolling 12 months

AACN may reset the cut score for the revised exam, so check it again before you test. 2025 first-time pass rate: 52.2%.

WHAT IS ON IT

Share of scored items. Your test date decides which plan applies, not your application date. The earlier plan is in the August 2026 handbook.

CONTENT AREA	FROM 11/19/2026	THROUGH 11/18/2026
Procedures	9%	11%
Complications	37%	33%
Therapeutic interventions	43%	43%
Monitoring and diagnostics	11%	13%

- Procedures: CABG on and off pump, valves, robotic and minimally invasive, TAVR and TMVR, maze, surgical LAA closure, aortic repair
- Complications: bleeding, tamponade, vasoplegia, cardiogenic shock, RV failure, dysrhythmias, AKI, stroke, delirium, HIT
- Interventions: resternotomy, CPR after cardiac surgery, pacing, IABP, temporary VADs, ECMO, CRRT, drains, drugs
- Monitoring: hemodynamics, echo, ECG, labs, ABG, mixed venous gas, pulse oximetry, EtCO2, radiography

EXAM TIP Interventions and complications are 80% of the new exam. All items test clinical judgment, mostly at the application and analysis levels: what should the nurse anticipate or do next?

EXAM TIP New in 2026: vasoplegia, SAM, air embolus, graft complications and graft care, thrombus and embolus, paralytic ileus, SIRS, reversal agents, calcium channel blockers and more. Dropped: BIS, cerebral oximetry, train-of-four, lumbar drains.

WHO CAN TAKE IT

- Current, unencumbered U.S. RN or APRN license
- Current ABSNC- or NCCA-accredited specialty certification in direct adult care (e.g., CCRN Direct Care or Tele-critical Care, PCCN Direct Care, CEN, CNOR, CPAN); CSC attaches to it, as in CCRN-CSC
- Practice hours in a U.S., Canadian or comparable facility, by one of two options:

*Direct care of acutely or critically ill adults. *Part of the total: adult cardiac surgery patients in the first 48 hours post-op. Orientation hours count only when the patient assignment is yours.*

OPTION	TOTAL HOURS	LAST YEAR	CARDIAC SURGERY*
2 years	1,750	875	875
5 years	2,000	144	1,000

CSC lasts 3 years. It goes inactive if the specialty certification it is attached to lapses.

HOW TO STUDY

Every day, clear Daily Review first: misses return tomorrow, and known questions space out toward exam day.

1. Week 1: set your exam date, read the test plan, and take a baseline CSC Mock Exam.
2. Weeks 1-2: Therapeutic Interventions, with subject practice, Level Up, and the Vasopressors and Inotropes, IABP Management, ECMO, Impella and CRRT One-Pagers.
3. Weeks 3-4: Complications, with the Shock Types, Electrolyte Imbalances and Rhythm Gallery One-Pagers.
4. Week 5: Procedures and Monitoring, with the Hemodynamic Normals and ABG Interpretation One-Pagers.
5. Weeks 6-7: Weakest Subject and Trouble Questions, plus two timed Mock Exams.
6. Week 8: let final-week review bring back past misses, skim your One-Pagers, and rest the day before.

TEST-DAY TIPS

- Bring a current government photo ID with signature that matches your AACN record; no military or temporary ID.
- Test center: if you arrive more than 15 minutes late, you will not be admitted. Scratch paper is available on request.
- Remote: check in 15-30 minutes early and expect a room scan. No scratch paper; you get a digital notepad.
- Pace about 80 seconds per question, bookmark hard items, and answer every question. Guessing is not penalized.
- Two 5-minute breaks are allowed, but the clock keeps running.
- Drugs appear by generic name. While AACN makes the switch, some items also show the trade name.

OFFICIAL RESOURCES

- CSC Certification page (eligibility, fees, apply)
- CSC Exam Handbook, August 2026 (8 sample questions, earlier plan)
- CSC Test Plan and Exam Bibliography, effective 11/19/2026
- Certification Exam Policy Handbook, September 2026 (test-day rules)
- Exam Statistics and Cut Scores
- AACN CSC practice exam (free 30-question trial)

AACN says current CSC study materials remain useful for the revised exam. Its bibliography lists 18 references used to validate items. Three cardiac texts:

- Bojar. Manual of Perioperative Care in Adult Cardiac Surgery, 6th ed., 2021
- Hardin, Kaplow. Cardiac Surgery Essentials for Critical Care Nursing, 4th ed., 2025
- Jacobson, Marzlin, Webner. Cardiovascular Nursing Practice, 3rd ed., 2021

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