PCCN Exam Guide

Format, test plan, eligibility and an 8-week study plan for AACN's progressive care exam

THE EXAM AT A GLANCE

FEATURE	PCCN (ADULT)
Items	150 (125 scored, 25 unscored pretest)
Time	3 hours (about 72 seconds per item)
Format	4-option multiple choice; fixed length, not adaptive; answers can be changed
To pass	82 of 125 scored items correct (since 1/31/2024)
Pass rate	70.1% first-time in 2025
Cost	$260 AACN member, $375 nonmember
Retest	$185 member, $290 nonmember; up to 4 tries in a rolling 12 months
Where	PSI testing center or live remote proctoring
Results	On screen; emailed report by content area

EXAM TIP The pass mark is a raw count, not a percentage, and can change. AACN does not say which items are unscored, so treat each as if it counts.

WHAT IS ON IT

Test plan for exams on or after February 6, 2024. Adult patients only.

Subareas total 101% because of rounding (AACN).

CONTENT AREA	SHARE
Clinical Judgment (total)	80%
Cardiovascular	20%
Respiratory	14%
Endocrine	6%
Hematology/Immunology/Oncology	3%
Neurology	7%
Gastrointestinal	7%
Renal	4%
Musculoskeletal	2%
Multisystem	15%
Behavioral/Psychosocial	3%
Professional Caring and Ethical Practice (total)	20%
Advocacy, Caring, Diversity, Learning	11%
Collaboration, Systems Thinking, Inquiry	9%

EXAM TIP Endocrine through renal add up to 27%, more than cardiovascular. Testable nursing actions include QTc and ST monitoring, sheaths, chest tubes, BiPAP, insulin infusions, NIHSS, CAM and CIWA.

WHO CAN TAKE IT

- Current, unencumbered U.S. RN or APRN license
- Two-year option: 1,750 hours caring for acutely ill adults, 875 in the most recent year
- Five-year option: 2,000 hours, 144 in the most recent year
- Hours in a U.S.- or Canada-based facility, or one with Magnet or JCI status
- Orientation counts only when you hold the patient assignment
- Knowledge Professional pathway (educators, managers): 1,040 hours in 2 years, 260 in the most recent year; same exam

Acuity, not unit name, decides: stepdown, telemetry, intermediate care and ED nurses may qualify. Testing window after approval: normally 90 days, currently 180.

HOW TO STUDY: 8 WEEKS

1. Day 1: Set your exam date in Settings and take a baseline Mock Exam. Then clear Daily Review daily, plus a weekly Professional Caring set.
2. Weeks 1 to 2: Cardiovascular. One-Pagers: Rhythm Gallery, ACLS Algorithms in Brief, Hemodynamic Normals, Shock Types at a Glance.
3. Week 3: Respiratory. One-Pagers: ABG Interpretation in 6 Steps, Capnography, Ventilator Modes and Settings.
4. Weeks 4 to 5: Endocrine, Heme, Neuro, GI, Renal. One-Pager: Electrolyte Imbalances.
5. Week 6: Musculoskeletal, Multisystem, Behavioral. One-Pagers: Sepsis and Septic Shock Bundle; Vasopressors and Inotropes; Sedation, Pain and Delirium Scales.
6. Week 7: Second Mock Exam, then Weakest Subject and Missed Questions.
7. Week 8: Last Mock Exam early, then only Daily Review and Trouble Questions.

EXAM TIP Most items test application and analysis, not just recall. AACN calls PCCN patients moderately stable but at elevated risk of instability: expect items on what to notice or do first.

TEST-DAY TIPS

- Current government photo ID with signature, matching your AACN record; no military or temporary IDs
- Testing center: more than 15 minutes late means no admission; scratch paper on request
- Remote: run PSI's Tutorial Test on the same computer and Wi-Fi; check in 15 to 30 minutes early (it can take 60+ minutes); on-screen notepad, no scratch paper
- Bookmark hard items and return; answer every item, as guessing is not penalized
- Up to two 5-minute breaks; the clock keeps running
- Leaving the testing area without permission voids the exam; phones, notes or copying items mean dismissal, no refund

OFFICIAL RESOURCES

- PCCN Exam Handbook, Direct Care (July 2026): test plan and sample items
- Certification Exam Policy Handbook (September 2026): exam-day rules
- Exam Statistics and Cut Scores page
- AACN Practice Exam: free 30-question trial; 150 questions for $35 member, $45 nonmember

From AACN's item-validation bibliography (newer editions may exist):

- Hartjes, Core Curriculum for Progressive and Critical Care Nursing, 8th ed. (2022)
- Burns and Delgado, AACN Essentials of Progressive Care Nursing, 5th ed. (2023)
- Johnson, AACN Procedure Manual for Progressive and Critical Care, 8th ed. (2023)
- Urden, Stacy and Lough, Critical Care Nursing: Diagnosis and Management, 9th ed. (2021); 10th ed. (2025) now out
- AHA 2020 Guidelines Update for CPR and ECC (full 2025 Guidelines out October 2025; items may lag)

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