Healthcare assistant

Healthcare assistants (HCAs) work in hospital or community settings, such as GP surgeries, under the guidance of a qualified healthcare professional.

This page has information on the role of the healthcare assistant, including entry requirements and skills needed.

Working life

As a healthcare assistant (HCA), you'll work under the guidance of a qualified healthcare professional, usually a nurse[^1]. Sometimes staff working in HCA roles are known as nursing assistants, nursing auxiliaries or auxiliary nurses.

The work varies depending on where you're based. In a hospital for example, you may be

- washing and dressing patients
- serving meals and helping to feed patients
- helping people to move around
- toileting
- making beds
- talking to patients and making them comfortable
- monitoring patients' conditions by taking temperatures, pulse, respirations and weight

In a health centres and GP surgery, you may

- sterilise equipment
- do health checks
- restock consulting rooms
- process lab samples
- take blood samples
- do health promotion or health education work

As well as nurses[^1], HCAs work with doctors, midwives[^2] and other healthcare professionals. They have a lot of contact with patients.
"The thing I enjoy most is providing individual patient care. Having a direct influence on a person's health is very fulfilling and I love watching a person progress and improve from admission to discharge." Luke Watson, Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Gateshead


Entry requirements

There are no set entry requirements to become a healthcare assistant. Employers expect good literacy and numeracy and may ask for GCSEs (or equivalent) in English and maths. They may ask for a healthcare qualification, such as BTEC or NVQ.

Employers expect you to have some experience of healthcare or care work. This could be from paid or voluntary work. There are sometimes apprenticeships [4] in healthcare that can give you experience to apply for HCA posts.

Find out more about volunteering and gaining experience [5]

Skills and personal characteristics needed

To be a healthcare assistant, you'll need to be

- caring and kind
- cheerful and friendly
- willing to be hands-on with patients
- willing to do personal care tasks (washing, toileting, etc)
- able to follow instructions and procedures
- able to work in a team but use their own initiative

You'll also need

- communication skills, including listening
- organisation skills
- observational skills
Training and development

Your training as a healthcare assistant will include basic nursing skills and you’ll work towards the Care Certificate, developed by Skills for Care, Skills for Health and Health Education England and launched in 2015.

Find out more about the Care Certificate

You may also be offered the chance to study for qualifications such as

- the CACHE level 2 Certificate in Healthcare Support Services
- the CACHE level 2 or 3 Diploma in Clinical Healthcare Support

These could be done through an apprenticeship.

Some HCAs join the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) as health practitioner members. The RCN runs training events and conferences so HCAs can update their skills and network with others doing similar work.

- Pay and conditions

  Healthcare assistants usually work standard hours of around 37.5 a week. They may work shifts, which could involve nights, early starts, evenings and weekends. In the NHS, HCAs are paid on the Agenda for Change (AfC) pay system. You’d typically start at AfC band 2. With further training and experience, you could apply for posts at bands 3 and 4 (as an assistant practitioner). Terms and conditions will vary outside of the NHS.

- Where the role can lead

  With experience and further training, you could become a senior healthcare assistant.

  You could then apply to train as an assistant practitioner or nursing associate. With the appropriate qualifications/evidence of academic ability, you could also train as one of the many degree-level healthcare professionals such as a nurse, podiatrist, midwife or occupational therapist.

Nursing careers resource

A careers resource has been jointly developed by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) and Health Education England (HEE) to help clinical support staff and registered nurses plan their health careers effectively. It shows different ways that you can develop your career with case studies, videos and next steps.
Visit the RCN/HEE careers resource for clinical support staff [17]

- Job market and vacancies

Expand / collapse

Opportunities for HCAs are growing in hospitals and in the community. There has also been an increasing number of apprenticeship [4] opportunities in health and social care.

Most NHS trusts advertise their vacancies on NHS Jobs [18]. Some advertise on their own websites. You can find a list of NHS organisations NHS Choices [19].

If you're applying for a role either directly in the NHS or in an organisation that provides NHS services, you'll be asked to show how you think the NHS values apply in your everyday work.

Find out more about NHS values [20].

- Further information

Expand / collapse

- Royal College of Nursing (HCA First Steps) [21]
- Royal College of Nursing [22]

Other roles that may interest you

- Assistant practitioner [23]
- Nursing associate [24]
- Occupational therapy support worker [25]
- Healthcare science assistants and associates [26]

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Links
[12] https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/glossary#AfC